

10: CONTENTMENT

Lets begin with a sign. Signs point us to God. It might be nice if I was going to turn this lectern into a snake but I am talking about a sign you know better than that. This sign. For me, this sign is a fantastic symbol of God. Jesus famously declared that He is the way, the truth and the life. When he said he was 'the way'. He meant he was the only way. He is not a way to another way of life. **He is the way to the life that is truly life.**

We are spending November and January studying the way of life revealed in Jesus, through the lens of the ten commandments. The rules themselves cannot make us righteous. But the miracle of Jesus, is that in Him we can fulfil them. Jesus took our punishment, on the Cross, so our relationship with God could be restored. And He rose again, to reveal the power of life in Him. Jesus has always been and will always be. And He has the power to give His life to us. **He is uniquely qualified to help us live God's way. He is the way. The one way.**

We begin, with the 10th command, which reveals the contentment possible in God's way. Like all the commands, is written in the negative. It tells us what not to do. The Lord says: "You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour." (Exodus 20:17)

Isn't this all a bit dated? **I am pretty sure I have never coveted anyone's donkey.** The examples are from another era (three and a half millennia ago) but the concept of wanting what is ours is well known. How often does the grass look greener on the other side of the fence? Whether it is desserts, clothes, salaries or lifestyles we want others have. No matter how hard you analyse the menu, how often do you wish you had someone else' dinner!

The result is the mess we are in. At the beginning of the year 2000, the three richest people on earth had more cash than the 47 poorest countries put together. 342 people had more money than half the world's population. We are nation of people that desire what we do not have. How many people order their life around the pursuit of a certain level of comfort or a certain position in life? In the City, people are pursuing money and power day and night, seven days a week. And what of the myriad magazines for celebrity worship? We want what we do not have. **Still, we are not satisfied.**

And yet, encouraging coveting is a major industry. Apparently, the Americans spend more money on advertising than on all the public institutions of education. We need to be on our guard because we are being taught to covet. Modern advertising sets out to manipulate our desires. It wants us to think the car we have been content with for years is in urgent need of replacement. Although, in the case of my car it probably is getting pretty urgent!

The problem with coveting is its an illusion. It promises to deliver but it fails. We work hard for money and power but if we get it will not satisfy. JD Rockefeller, once the richest man in the world, was asked "How much money does it take to be really satisfied?" His reply said it all: "Just a little bit more". There is nothing in this world of sufficient value that we should covet it. King Solomon, the first existentialist, wrote of the nihilism of materialism as follows: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

"For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless— a miserable business! (Ecclesiastes 4:8) **Coveting will not give us what we long for.**

Worse still, it traps us. The German philosopher Schopenhauer said that coveting “is like sea water; the more we drink the thirstier we become”. Coveting is addictive. It becomes a way of life. The more we want things the more we want more things. In time, we are enslaved to the lust for more things. When Israel conquered new lands, God warned them to burn the images of the local gods, saying “Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it.” (Deuteronomy 7:25)

But surely coveting isn't all that serious. You can be prosecuted for stealing but it's not against the law to covet. You can't legislate against it but its effects are devastating. Paul explains that “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.” (I Timothy 6:8-9) How many wars have begun with coveting land? What was Hitler's excuse for invading Austria? 'Lebensraum', living space – Germany just needed a little more. And our desire for more is clearly a key factor in the environmental crisis. Our coveting is silent. **It is a problem of the heart but it doesn't take much to see the actions that follow. Every act of theft starts with the desire to have what is not yours.**

Coveting will destroy even what we already have. We will do anything to get what we want even if we hurt people along the way. There are lots of examples of envy in the Bible and every one I can think of ends in murder or attempted murder. Cain envied the fact that God accepted Abel's sacrifice and not his: So Cain killed Abel. Saul envied the fact that God had chosen David to be the king that would replace him: so Saul tried to kill David. David envied another man's wife, which led to adultery and murder to cover it up. King Ahab envied a vineyard and his wife had the owner murdered so Ahab could have it.

Praise God, He has give us a better way. Instead of dissatisfaction, slavery and destruction. There is contentment, freedom and great gain.

First there is love. Jesus taught that “The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Romans 13:9) The heart of the commandment: is to love our neighbour. Love does not covet. At its root coveting is selfishness. If we love someone, we will be glad when good happens to them - not want it for ourselves. And there is every chance this may benefit our relationships with each other and also with God. How does it feel if someone hates your brother? It is the same for God. He is hurt when we envy our neighbour whom he cares for. **God's way is a way of love. It does not envy.**

Not coveting is the route to contentment. If we render the command in the positive, it would say be content with what you have. If you are content, you are truly free. You are not enslaved by the need for more. You are free to appreciate what you have. King Solomon observed that: “The righteous eat to their hearts' content, but

the stomach of the wicked goes hungry.” (Proverbs 13:25) Solomon did not mean the righteous will be richer. He meant the righteous would be content.

Contentment is a wonderful thing. As Paul told his brother Timothy, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” (1 Timothy 6:6) It is free from worry, its free to appreciate what it has, it is satisfied, it is fulfilled. For long periods, Paul was imprisoned for his faith. But he wrote “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” (Philippians 4:11) Despite his chains and hardship, he wrote to the churches “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4). **Even in great hardship, Paul could rejoice in contentment.**

The awful results of coveting and the fantastic benefits of contentment are clear. We have convincing reasons not to covet. But they are not enough. I think most people would agree coveting is bad but still we all do it. The command only reveals what is wrong it cannot change us – in fact it encourages us to do wrong. We know the best way to get a kid to steal cookies is to tell him not to steal them!

We need Jesus. Jesus came to fulfil the command – to be the one way to God. If you are living in discontent, consider Jesus.

Jesus points us to satisfaction in God. Paul wrote that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who .. made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (Philippians 2:5-6) Jesus is content in his relationship with God, even in the poorest of circumstances. He was content in poverty because his satisfaction was in God not in his circumstances.

God is not calling us to poverty. He has promised to provide all we need. But He is calling us to be content in Him. Instead of seeking satisfaction in things we need to seek our satisfaction in the God who made our hearts and desires. Take the desire for significance. Its true fulfilment lies in understanding we are loved children of a heavenly father. But many people find significance in wearing the right clothes with the right label. Lets turn away from our selfish desires and seek God. Saint Augustine did his fair share of wild living but having come back to God he said: “you have made our hearts Lord - they are restless until they find rest in you”.

Jesus is the source of satisfaction. Once in his ministry, Jesus spoke at the end of a feast, saying: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.” (John 7:37-39). **If we are thirsty, it is to Jesus we must go to drink.**

Later, in Samaria, Jesus asked a woman for a drink and told her: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” Jesus spoke about a living water that is a gift from God. Jesus went on to explain that this gift is no regular H₂O. He said, “Everyone who drinks this water [i.e. H₂O] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:11, 13-14)

What Jesus gives us quenches our thirst. Unlike H₂O, it keeps on quenching us. If we open our hearts to Jesus, He will pour his Spirit into us and his Spirit will feed us and satisfy us, now and forever. **Indeed, He has promised that His Spirit will become a spring in us, overflowing life on those around like ‘streams of living water’.**

We also need to reject fear. Because fear feeds covetousness. The number one worry is money. Coveting is not purely greed or unchaste desire it is a product of fear. We worry about money cause we fear we will not have enough.

Did you know that ‘do not fear’ is the most common command in the bible? God says it more than 370 times. Why? Not because bad things don’t happen but because He is God and we can trust him. Jesus told his disciples: "Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. ... Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. (Luke 12: 22-34)

Do not worry about what you will eat or drink, sell your possessions and give to the poor. It’s a pretty strange plan! Jesus meant that we can be content because of our relationship with God. He explained that our relationship with God is that of Father and Son. Our Father knows what we need. And He is a good Father: He knows how to give good gifts to his children and he does not fail to do so. **Consider how quick Jesus was to give healing when it was asked of him. And consider what Jesus was willing to give us, even his own life.**

In fear, we focus our hopes on things and people or ourselves and not on God. But we don’t have power over typhoons or wars or the other things that come against us. Since God knows what we need and he has promised to provide, **we should set our desire on God not on things.**

We can be content if we put our trust in God. The writer to the Hebrews encouraged us to “Keep [our] lives free from the love of money and be content with what [we] have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5) When we covet, we effectively say “God we don’t believe you can provide”. **Jesus is calling us to reject the fear and doubt that cause us to covet and to trust in God.**

Coveting does not lead to contentment but dissatisfaction with what we already have. Nietzsche observed that “we grow weary of the things we most desire”. We need to counter coveting by developing grateful hearts that give thanks for everything, not just before a meal. The Western world assumes we deserve what we have. But we do not: it is a gift. And we should be wise stewards. What we are given is a loan. It is not ours to use as we please. We hold our things for God.

We can develop hearts of gratitude and stewardship by our behaviour, such as giving thanks more. But we may need some heart surgery. God made a wonderful promise through his prophet Ezekiel. “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I

will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek 36:26).
If you are in need of a refilling of the spirit or a heart transplant in any area of your life we would love to pray for you.

We should focus on relationships not things. God desires us to have high quality relationships. How are yours? If our focus is on our comfort and pleasure, we may spend our time on such things rather than the people around us. And if we envy them we aren't truly loving them. People matter, they are eternal, things aren't. As Solomon said: **“Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred”** (Prov 15:17)

Finally, be a giver. Perhaps the best antidote for coveting is to be generous with what we have. Instead of grasping for more lets learn to give away. Giving breaks the covetous desire. Remember Jesus taught that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). If our giving is going to change us in needs to hurt. Biblical charity is more than giving away what we can do without.

REVIEW SUMMARY

Its time for a bit of heart surgery. I suggest we do this in twos and threes.

Lets take 5 minutes to evaluate our priorities. If we don't live by priorities we will live by pressures. Let me give you three simple questions:

- 1 What do you like to talk about most?
- 2 What do you invest most of your time and energy in?
- 3 What do you spend your money on?

Now we are going to take some time to pray.

I have said that Jesus is the source of satisfaction. He offers himself. The living water of his spirit as a gift to everyone. If you want to know the satisfaction of God's Spirit you need merely ask Him.

Maybe you have experienced the satisfaction of the Spirit but you are struggling to trust God with the challenges of life. If you are honest, you know you can't see beyond your financial woes or trouble at work. God understands but he wants to be your provider. He can give you a new heart. Lets pray for breakthrough.

Coveting may seem a soft-centred command. The one we can live without. But it may be the most perilous. Have you every dropped a frog into a saucepan of boiling water? I hope not. Apparently, it will jump out in a flash. But if you put a frog into cold water and gradually turn up the heat the frog stays until its boiled alive. The frog doesnt' see the threat in the slow rise in temperature.

Lets take this command to heart and not be boiled alive.