

God's Concern for My Contentment

Deuteronomy 5:21

Introduction

Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, once stated, "Next to faith, this is the highest art: to be content in the calling in which God has placed you. I have not learned it yet."

I feel a lot like Martin Luther this morning, because, while there is a simplicity to this final commandment, I must confess that I have not arrived. In fact, while my family and I were driving back into town from vacation yesterday, Hannah and I were discussing some personal trials that we are going through as family. As we were talking about it, I mentioned how hard it was to go from having dreams about retiring one day, traveling together, making all sorts of grand plans for our future to having reality reintroduce itself into our life almost as soon as we started making our way back home. Then, I told her, "And you know what? I'm preaching on contentment tomorrow morning." After spending a fair amount of my week, passing by the stuff that other people owned, and wishing to myself that I too owned those things, here I am this morning, addressing the congregation that God has entrusted to me as an under-shepherd, preparing to tell you that we must put death our coveting and learn contentment.

So, if I'm being honest with you, contentment is not something that comes easy for me. And preaching on it almost feels hypocritical because I know my own heart. I fall dreadfully short in this area. So, I'm having to preach this passage to myself while I also preach it to you. My hope is that God would soften each of our hearts and grant us to learn contentment together as His people this morning...

Deuteronomy 5:21

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Exposition

In brief, the 10th commandment prohibits us from desires that are not rooted in love for God and love for others. To state it positively, the 10th commandment exhorts us to be content with what God, in His mercy, has provided us, and to not envy or be greedy for the things that God has blessed our neighbors with. So, you could restate the commandment positively and say, "Be content. Be content with your spouse. Be content with your stuff."

However, it must be stated that the point of the commandment is not that all desires are wrong. No, that would not make sense. There are certain things that we are supposed to desire. In fact, God has made us for such desires, whether that be food or drink or shelter or love or spiritual things. The apostle Peter tells his audience to "desire pure spiritual food" (1 Peter 2:2). The apostle Paul tells us of his "ambition to preach the gospel where the name of Christ is unknown" (Romans 15:20). There is nothing inherently wrong with such desires.

So, what is this command about coveting really about? It is about how our desires can become sinful when our desires are not ordered according to God's will for our lives. God's will for our lives is revealed in His Word to us. He has called us to be content, to be satisfied with what He has provided us. Yet, when full of greed our hearts desire other things, we are guilty of coveting.

In answering a similar question about when our desires become sinful, Francis Schaeffer wrote, “Desire becomes sin when it fails to include the love of God or men. Further, I think there are two practical tests as to when we are coveting against God or men: first, I am to love God enough to be contented; second, I am to love men enough not to envy.” I deeply appreciate Schaeffer’s emphasis on love. Ultimately, we are guilty of coveting when our love for God grows cold and we begin to desire other things because of a lack of contentment in God and lack of concern for our neighbors.

In the 10th commandment, we see essentially two categories that should not be coveted: people (wife, servants) and property (houses, animals). In terms of people, the commandment forbids coveting a neighbor’s spouse or servants. We will look at the Deuteronomic Code regarding the relationship between bondservants and their masters later in our study, but for now, we need to see that they are differentiated from animals and other forms of personal property. As such, the 10th commandment reveals a higher value for human life than other ancient near east legal documents. This is also true regarding the status of the wife. Thus, the 10th commandment reveals God’s concern for the vulnerable in Israel. Some people will attempt to use passages like Deuteronomy 5:21 to argue that the Bible is harmful toward women and servants, yet, a more careful reading of the passage reveals that, as one prominent Hebrew scholar puts it, “By removing *the wife* from the list of other *property* (chattel), they establish that the law does not regard the woman as merely one commodity among others comprising a house” (Levinson). To summarize, then, we should not look at the things related to our neighbors, whether people or property, and desire in our hearts that those things belong to us instead. The 10th commandment forbids such desires.

Now, if you are wondering to yourself, “But what’s the big deal about wanting something that belongs to someone else? How is that wrong?”, I would simply point you to numerous stories in God’s Word that show the devastating impact of disordered desires. We could think of Adam and Eve’s desire for the fruit in the Garden of Eden, which was “pleasing to the eyes.” We could think of David’s desire for Uriah’s wife, which led him to commit murder and sexual abuse. We could think of the story of Achan who coveted the gold and silver of the idols from Jericho, and then stole those items, hid them in his tent, which resulted in God’s curse coming upon the whole camp. There are a lot of examples of how our desires go wrong. The book of James succinctly in James 4:1-3, “¹ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? ² 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. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

Conclusion

So, let us never think that our desires are no big deal. Disordered desires lead to destruction. And the 10th commandment is prohibiting us from such desires. God has not designed us to ceaselessly desire other things. He has designed us for contentment. Yet, sin has distorted this design and warped our relationship to God and others. Instead of satisfaction and contentment, we struggle with greed, jealousy, and envy, even though we do not want to admit it.

Yet, in God’s mercy, this 10th commandment, direct us away from the desires of our flesh and to God.

Implication

We must learn contentment. In Philippians 4:10-13, the apostle Paul wrote,

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, **for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.** ¹² 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. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Contentment is not a virtue that we are born with. We must learn contentment. And, as the apostle Paul would teach us, contentment is learned in various context in this life. Contentment is learned when we find ourselves in need. Contentment is learned when we find ourselves with plenty. Whether well fed or hungry, living in plenty or in want, it is possible to be content. How? By recognizing that God will take care of us, no matter the situation. Recognizing that God is on His throne, ruling over all, and that He intends to do us good for His glory, frees us from the tyranny of worry about the things of this life. Being confident that Christ will strengthen us, as Philippians 4:13 says, give us freedom over the fear and dread that keeps us up at night worrying about the things that we cannot control.

Last night, as I was lying in bed, worried about the trials my family is going through, thinking to myself, how am I going to preach this sermon tomorrow morning, I started to pray and beg God to take away the fear and the concern that I have. That I would learn contentment. And in that moment, I said to God, "I need to let you be God, and me be me. Because when I try to be You, things don't go well." To be sure, God never needs my permission to be God. He is always God, regardless of whether I also act like it or not. What I was saying in that moment was, "For too long now, I've worried myself with things that only God can take care of. The burden is too heavy for me to carry. But it's not too heavy for God."

In that moment, when I told God, "I need you to be God, and me be me," God, in His mercy, met me in my need, and started teaching me about what it means to learn contentment. I'm still learning, even this morning as I was going back over these notes, God was bringing truths to my mind to strengthen me. I have not arrived. I will, doubtless, struggle in the days and months ahead, as I am sure many of you will as you learn contentment. But I believe that God is faithful and that He will teach us contentment that comes through Christ's power, if we call upon Him and ask Him to do it.

So, this morning, if you are struggling to learn contentment, if you are struggling to overcome covetousness, I want to invite you to pray and ask God to start teaching you contentment in Christ. Maybe you need to pray something like what I prayed last night, confessing to God that you are weary of trying to do His work. Telling Him that you need Him to be God in your life, not you. Maybe you need to ask God to meet you in your need. Maybe you need to ask God to meet you in your abundance. Both those in need and in abundance must learn contentment, otherwise, our desires will consume us. But God is faithful. He will hear the prayers of His people. And answer.

Invitation - "You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."