

The Trap of Covetousness

Deuteronomy 5:21

It has been a hot week here in northern Wisconsin. Caleb had a football game on Tuesday afternoon in Osceola and when I pulled into the parking lot it read 87 degrees on my truck thermometer. Add to that the humidity and direct sunlight and it was miserable just sitting in the stands – I can't imagine playing the game! Sophia had a cross country race and some of the runners ended up fainting in the heat. When it's hot like this, we get thirsty and start looking around for something to drink – think about your favorite drink to satisfy your thirst...

I remember when I was 16 years old, I was insulating the attic of a turkey barn down in Iowa. It was my job to feed the hopper in the box truck that blew the insulation up into the attic. It had to be about 100 degrees and 90% humidity. The sun was beating down on the truck and there was no air movement. I was pouring sweat and I ran out of water within a couple hours. By late morning I was so thirsty that I was desperate. So I looked around and my only choice for satisfying my thirst was a 5 gallon bucket of water that I used to sprinkle on the insulation to keep the dust down. The pail was dirty and the water had a film of fiberglass floating on top of it, but I was so thirsty I eventually plunged my face under the surface and guzzled as much as I could. I wouldn't recommend it, but it was incredibly satisfying in that moment.

According to an article in Taste of Home magazine, the best drink to satisfy your thirst is none other than good old water – preferably clean water! With all the other drinks out there, it's at the top of the list. It hydrates us and doesn't contain anything extra that our body doesn't need. But oftentimes when we're thirsty we want to reach for something else. I know when I'm working outside on a hot day, one of the best tasting drinks I can think of is an ice cold can of Coke. Even seeing those Coke commercials on TV makes my mouth water.

But in the same magazine article, do you know what it said was the worst drink to reach for when you need hydration? A bottle of pop! Soft drinks contain caffeine, which actually causes dehydration because it encourages more water to leave your body. They also have lots of sugar and other stuff your body doesn't need. So if you reach for Coke or Mountain Dew all day long to quench your thirst on a hot day, it might taste good, but you'd be in real trouble. It's actually working

against your efforts to hydrate. Though it tastes good, it will never truly satisfy you; it's kind of like a trap that will eventually leave you dehydrated.

Today we're going to talk about another trap that works the same way. God created us with an inner thirst in our spirit that drives us to find satisfaction. It's the desire for enjoyment in life; to experience happiness and fulfillment. We aren't neutral beings when it comes to what we want in life. We aren't just satisfied with having our needs met and surviving. There's something inside us that wants to experience more. We're driven by a thirst for more. And God has given us something that can truly satisfy that desire – like cool, refreshing water. But oftentimes we turn to other things instead – things that may taste good and quench our thirst for a little while, but in the end leave us empty. So we get caught in a trap of trying to satisfy our thirst with things that leave us even more thirsty in the end.

I've been caught in that trap before and there are many times when I still want to take the bait. Chances are you too face the same temptation. So this morning we are going to look at what that trap is, what the bait looks like, and what direction we need to go instead if we're going to truly satisfy our inner thirst. We are studying the last of the Ten Commandments today and this command will introduce us to what this trap is.

Deuteronomy 5:21

²¹ *“And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. And you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”*

The trap that seeks to lure us in to satisfy our inner thirst is the trap of covetousness. Covetousness dangles a tasty bait in front of our eyes and promises to satisfy our inner cravings, but in the end always leaves us wanting more. Like all human beings, the Israelites would be tempted to get caught in that trap and God knew it would eventually destroy them, so when he brought them out of Egypt he gave them this command. “You shall not covet,” and he went on to list several things that are common bait.

It's important for us to understand what it means to covet so we don't take this command the wrong way. There are a lot of words and concepts out there that are similar, and sometimes we can beat ourselves up for doing something we

think is coveting, when it really isn't, so we first need to figure out what it actually means. To start, I looked into the definition of the original Hebrew word. The definition is surprisingly simple: "to desire, or take pleasure in." Right away that seemed a little vague, so I looked at all the places it's used in the Old Testament but that didn't help a lot either. In the Old Testament it's used in both a positive and negative way. Sometimes it was actually good to covet, like in coveting the rules of the Lord. Other times it was bad, like coveting another man's wife.

So coveting in itself didn't seem all that bad in the OT – as long as you covet the right things, you're good to go. And apparently, you're not supposed to covet the things that belong to your neighbor. It's obvious you shouldn't covet his wife because that could lead to adultery – but the 7th commandment already addresses that. You're also not supposed to covet his house or field, or servants, or animals, but if covet just means 'to desire,' that doesn't seem like that bad of a sin – certainly not bad enough to make it in the Top Ten list. I have a hard time believing God would say, "Hey, if you think your neighbor's house and pasture is really nice and you wish you had them, I'm going to bring the covenant curses upon you." It just doesn't seem like that bad of a thing – I even wonder if it's even a sin at all?

So far, this definition seems to be kind of weak and it doesn't even deal with the desires we have for all the stuff that doesn't belong to our neighbors – like all the stuff that's for sale in the open market. Is it ok to covet that stuff as long as it doesn't belong to a neighbor?

So I decided to look for a fuller definition in the New Testament. There's a passage where Paul quotes this command and talks about how big of a struggle it was for him. So, I looked into the word Paul used to see what he had in mind when he thought of the tenth commandment, and then the meaning became much clearer. Romans 7:7 says, "*What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'*"

What did Paul have in mind when he thought of that command? The word he uses for "covet" is *epithumeó* and the definition is much stronger than its Hebrew counterpart. It means "*to long for, covet, lust after, set the heart upon. Passionate desire; to show focused passion as it aptly builds on what a person truly yearns*

for. Greatly desire to do or have something – to long for, to desire very much.” So that definition has a much greater intensity than the word in Hebrew and I think more accurately reflects what coveting really means.

In Paul’s mind the tenth commandment isn’t merely about wanting something your neighbor has, it’s about wanting it with an all-consuming intensity – trying to satisfy an intense thirst deep inside you. Coveting is wanting or desiring that is juiced up on steroids. And based on the way Paul uses the command in Romans 7, I think it applies not only to the things a neighbor has, but anything this world has to offer. In settling in the Promised Land God didn’t want his people to be consumed with the driving desire for other people’s stuff and, in general, he didn’t want them to be consumed with the driving passion for the things this world has to offer. That kind of covetousness would lead to all kinds of problems. It’s ok to want the good things this world has to offer – please hear me in that – they’re blessings given by God for us to enjoy – but it’s not ok to become obsessed with acquiring them. That’s covetousness, and that’s the trap we can easily get caught in.

When we covet something, we pursue it to try to quench that inner thirst deep inside us. We long to experience life to the full and God gave us that desire. But when we try to satisfy that longing by obsessively pursuing the things in this world, we fall into the trap of covetousness. No matter how hard we try, those things won’t fulfill us in the end. They might taste good and give us some enjoyment for a little while, but they won’t satisfy our thirst. Like a 12 pack of Coke on a hot and humid day, they will only leave us more thirsty. It’s a trap and those things are the bait to lure us in. We can see that bait more clearly by simply going back to the tenth commandment and looking at the list.

Do not covet your neighbor’s wife. You might be a married person who’s not real happy with your husband or wife, looking at someone else’s spouse with admiration, befriending them, hoping there might be an opportunity for you to end up with them. You think that being married to them will finally make you happy. So rather than pursuing restoration with your own spouse, you pursue a relationship with someone else’s, letting one thing lead to another. They’re the bait and you’re getting sucked into a trap.

Or you might be single, thinking that a boyfriend or girlfriend, or getting engaged and married will give you the happy life you’ve been longing for. You’re so driven

by that desire that you just can't be alone. You have to have someone by your side. I've seen this desire capture people as early as grade school. They have to have a boyfriend or girlfriend and when one relationship comes to an end they quickly jump into another, trying to fulfill an insatiable need. This carries on into adulthood and that person leaves behind a trail of divorces and ex-spouses all in an attempt to find the one who will truly satisfy. It will never work. It's a trap. It's good to want to get married. Marriage is gift God gives us to enjoy. But it's not ok to be consumed by that desire.

Do not covet your neighbor's house or field. Oh boy, this one hits close to home. I have this desire to live in the country in a bigger home with a pole shed and to own some land where I can have a dog and cut down a tree or go hunting and it can quickly cross the line into coveting. That dream promises me that if I obtain it I will find ultimate happiness, but it's a lie. It's the bait trying to lure me in. Obtaining that dream will not satisfy the longing inside me. My desire for those things isn't bad and if someday the Lord gives them to me I will gladly accept them – they are good gifts God gives us to enjoy. But being consumed by a driving need to have them is a trap. It's covetousness and it will only lead to disappointment in the end and who knows what kind of destruction and pain I could cause by trying to force it to happen. How many people find themselves in financial bondage, marital crisis, family disputes and more because of their feverish efforts to satisfy a personal obsession?

Do not covet your neighbor's male servant or female servant. In our modern context I think this translates into material possessions. In Israelite society, families and possessions were organized under the headship of a patriarch who would acquire fields, vineyards, buildings, machinery, flocks, herds, sons, daughters, and servants. These were all part of his estate. The role of a servant could range from a minimum wage field worker, to the second in command next to the patriarch himself. So to covet another person's servant was to covet a valuable possession of his, similar to coveting your neighbor's ox or donkey as well.

Today this applies to all sorts of material possessions: Furniture, vehicles, ATV's, power tools, kitchen appliances, lawn mowers, TV's... We have been inundated with advertising and messages that tell us that in order to find happiness in life, we need to have what everyone else has. We need to have the best and the biggest and we need to have it all so that we can do whatever we want to do,

whenever we want to do it. So we buy, buy, buy – even things we can't afford. We store and stockpile and build sheds and rent storage units just so we can try to fit our stuff. We've taken the bait – hook, line, and sinker – that tells us that by having all this stuff we will be happy.

But it's a trap. These things give us a temporary joy, then most of them sit on a shelf or in a shed, hardly ever being used, cluttering up our lives and controlling us. We can't do whatever we want to do whenever we want to do it because all this stuff has to be organized, maintained, and repaired and it ends up consuming our lives. Not only that, but we usually pay for it with credit cards because we don't have cash on hand and we end up paying more than it's worth because of the 19% interest we're paying on the revolving credit card debt. Again, there's nothing wrong with wanting or having any of these things, but when we're driven by the continual lust to have it all, we are letting covetousness rule our lives.

Covetousness is a trap because as you can see in all these ways it promises to give us joy and fulfillment in life, and it does so for a brief time, but it always leaves us high and dry. Like an ice cold Coke on a steamy day, it can never truly satisfy our thirst. God didn't want his people to be controlled by it and he doesn't want us controlled by it either. He wants us to go about life in a different direction – pursuing something that can actually satisfy that inner desire.

We see what that is in Jeremiah 2:12-13. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of it when he confronts the nation of Israel for their covetous actions: *“Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord,¹³ for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”* Here, coveting the things of this world is compared to digging out our own water cisterns to try and satisfy our inner longings. These are the things of the world, but they are broken and can hold no water because they can never satisfy our thirst. But notice what the people had to forsake in order to do that... they had to forsake God, the fountain of living waters.

God is the one who alone can satisfy our inner thirst. He is the ever-flowing spring of water that can satisfy the wants and desires deep within. David wrote in Psalm 42:1-2: *“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”* Your soul thirsts for the living God too and you will only be content when you continually drink from him. Psalm 63:5-7 says,

“My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, ⁶ when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷ for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.” God created us with wants and desires to ultimately draw us closer to him, and that is where we find true contentment. He gives us many gifts to enjoy, but those gifts are not meant to distract us from him and become idols that we worship instead of him. They’re meant to lead us to him as we marvel in his grace and kindness.

So God wants us to forsake the trap of coveting the things of this world so we can enjoy true contentment in him. But how do we do that? What does that look like in our lives? What do we do with the desires we have for the good things this world has to offer?

As I was running with a friend, he gave me the idea of taking that desire – maybe it’s the desire to get married, or to live in the country, or to buy a new TV – and lay it down before God; surrender it to him, and ask him what he would have you do with it. Put it in its proper place so that it doesn’t become an idol: “What I want is a good thing, but I want you more.” We need to acknowledge that the gifts will never satisfy our inner longings, only he can. And then we need to ask him what he wants us to do with our desire. “Do you want me to let it go? Or pursue it? Or simply wait?”

In some cases he may give the go ahead to pursue that desire, but we must do so with wisdom, prayer, and accountability, so that desire doesn’t become an obsession and an idol. It can be a difficult thing to keep it in check, but with prayerful submission and thankfulness, we can enjoy God’s good gifts and use them to enjoy and glorify him. In other cases he does call us to wait or to forsake our desires for earthly things and that can be a difficult act of surrender, but it can also set us free from the trap of covetousness so we can experience freedom and growing joy and contentment in him. We wait on him rather than trying to force something to happen.