

## Exodus 20 v17 Be Content

### Introduction

Exodus 20:17 states: *You shall not covet your neighbour's house* [everything he owns]. *You shall not covet your neighbour's wife* [some relationships are off limits], *or his male or female servant* [targeting his employees], *his ox* [a beast of burden –in effect the ‘equipment’ he uses to do his work –ie no asset stripping of his business] *or donkey* [his mode of transport!], *or anything that belongs to your neighbour*. In the western world most people will seriously struggle to get their heads around this commandment. What is perceived here as a vice has been portrayed in our culture as a virtue. So we need to take some time to think about what God might be saying to us in this verse. Think about these statements:

1. The closest to perfection a person comes is when they fill in a job application form.
2. The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement.
3. The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.
4. People live in one of two tents: content or discontent.
5. However long you take agonizing over the menu deciding which desert to have, when the next person's choice arrives you realise you have made the wrong choice.
6. God made us a little lower than the angels, but most of us are concerned to climb a little higher than the Joneses.
7. The average family ambition is to make as much money as they are spending.
8. Our yearnings will always exceed our earnings. [J. John, *Ten*, pp.21-22]

Anyone who claims they don't desire anything is probably either clinically depressed or close to death, because the desire to improve one's situation is natural and good. If you are ill it is normal to want to do what is necessary to become well. If you are studying at school, college or university it is not unreasonable to wish to work hard and pass your tests and exams. We all want to be loved and to have people who count us as friends and acquaintances. In the workplace and in our families we desire to be respected and valued for who we are –and for what we do. These are all good desires commended in the Bible and an essential part of the glue that binds us together in human society. However, in recent generations, possibly more than in previous centuries due to the lure of advertising, our thinking has altered in an unhealthy direction. For me to be loved properly I need to alter my body (possibly with cosmetic surgery) because the size \_\_ model is the baseline for an acceptable appearance; for me to belong in my social circles I need to live in this kind of house or drive that kind of car –or? a variety of statements could be made here but the common denominator is the need to obtain more material things that will supposedly fill the ‘gap’ in our lives –if the adverts are to be believed. Yet more than three thousand years ago God sought to address this problem in a considerably less materialistic society than our own by this the Tenth Commandment.

### 1. What is covetousness?

The root word in Hebrew means to ‘desire’ or ‘delight in’ something. It is used in the Song of Solomon (Song 2:3) *I delight to sit in his shade* referring to sit beside the one that woman loved. Peter in I Peter 1:2:2 urged his readers: *Like new born babies, crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation*. That is, desire to each day each God's Word and let it soak into your mind so that you become more and more directed by its thinking and teaching. In I Timothy 3:1 Paul used this concept in another constructive way. He wrote: *If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task*. Here are three examples of the positive use of this idea of wanting to grow in affection for another human being; desiring to know God better through reading His Word and wanting to have the opportunity to serve the

Lord in the Church through some office or ministry. Jesus challenged His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount with these words in Matthew 6:33: *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* In other words Jesus was saying in your time for the weekly schedule –mark time for God the first entry into your diary whether it is church on a Sunday or the short time for prayer and Bible reading each day block it out so that other things cannot take their place. When budgeting finances do ahead of time and set aside what you will give to the Lord whether through a tithe to the local church or offerings to a range of good causes rather than seeing what is left over when our own immediate requirements are taken care of; when making decisions about possible promotion at work or changing jobs, for example, think carefully how will this affect what I can offer to the Lord as well as how will this affect my family or other areas of my life? Paul in Philippians 3:12-14 challenged these young Christians to think they had ‘arrived’ as mature Christians without a need to seek further spiritual growth in their relationship with God. He wrote: *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.* <sup>13</sup>*Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead,* <sup>14</sup>*I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.* Yet sinful human nature twists what is good into something that is potentially first unhealthy for us and then possibly harmful to our growth as persons. In Genesis 3 Eve and Adam coveted the one thing that God had forbidden them to possess, the fruit of the tree in the centre of the garden. His intention was the establishing of healthy boundaries for their lives, in their relationship with Him; something every good parent will do with their children; or every teacher with their pupils. When the Israelites were on the verge of entering the Promised Land they were commanded by God to destroy the idols of the defeated nations. Deuteronomy 7:25 states: <sup>25</sup>*The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the Lord your God.* The gold and silver were not bad in themselves, but any association with idolatry had to be avoided. A shop specialising in ‘adult’ dvds might, for example, set up a section of Walt Disney children’s dvds and offer to rent them out for a lesser charge than a regular Video /dvd hire store, but there is no contest about which store a Christian would use if renting a film for their children. At the heart of this matter is self-discipline. In Joshua 7 there is the tragic story of Achan, which led first to defeat for the Israelite army at Ai, including the deaths of thirty-six soldiers. In time it led to the death of this man and his family whom he had led into sin. What was the root problem? In Joshua 7:20-21 we read his confession: <sup>20</sup>*Achan replied, ‘It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done:’* <sup>21</sup>*when I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.’* It was, in effect, a get rich quick scheme, a gamble that pays off for the very few at the expense of the majority. How often the casualties of such ventures are ignored and the few success stories lauded to the skies! Covetousness includes a number of characteristics including:

## **2. Clinging on to what we already possess**

(a) **Unrealistic views concerning our current circumstances** I haven’t heard it for years, but as a youngster growing up I heard snatches of conversation between older adults commenting on how much people had left when they died. For some people that was the first section of the regional paper they turned to each week. The answer is of course ‘everything’ connected to the world. In Charles Dicken’s work *A Christmas Carol*, old Marley’s ghost lamented spending his life hoarding money. ‘My spirit never walked beyond our counting house-mark

me- in life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money changing hole.’ It doesn’t only happen to people who struggle on the margins of solvency it equally or possibly more often happens to the rich. Howard Hughes, one of the richest men on earth when he died left roughly £2 billion in his will. Yet he lived in his later years as almost a prisoner in his own home, in spartan conditions. A commentator on his life described his existence as: ‘sunless, joyless...a virtual prisoner walled in by his own crippling fears and weaknesses’ (B. Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for today*, pp.257-258) . We live in a society where, with the exception of the last few years in this economic depression, living standards have gone up and up. Even in the mad world of Premier League football we think salaries cannot get any higher –then an even wealthier man buys a club and offers even more obscene payments for chasing a ball around on a grassy park! In 1999 Manchester United captain Roy Keane was given a four year contract paying him approximately £50,000 a week – more than ten million pounds in total. Yet today at Manchester City there are a number of players earning over £200,000 a week. Yet does such wealth make them play better and be more socially responsible? Mario Balatelli and Carlos Tevez were but the most prominent examples of a number of irresponsible footballers this last season. We will never be in their league, but the desire for riches is common. (b) **Unrealistic views about money** Did you know that 99.9999 percent of people who play the National Lottery will never win it? A decade ago £83 million a week (£24.3 billion a year) was spent on tickets and nine out of ten jackpot winners continue to play as before. It is the only tax invented by a British Government that people have willingly paid! In Ecclesiastes 5:10 the author summed up so well the problem faced by Hughes and so many other people down the centuries: *Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless.* Paul, in his first letter to Timothy also commented with perception on this subject. I Timothy 6:10 states: *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.* Very few people deep down would deny a desire for a little bit more money, but the problem is the line just keeps extending and calling a halt to the pursuit of it has never been easy. Yet this can extend to each area of our lives as we might imagine or dream that the ‘grass is greener’ elsewhere in other relationships, other jobs, with other friends or families or other churches. Too often people regret mistakes made through imagining unrealistic expectations regarding potential changes in their lives. The real world can be a tough unforgiving and painful place at times. God wants to spare His children going through the painful consequences of unwise choices that we might be tempted to make when we step outside the loving boundaries for living He has created. (c) **Unrealistic expectations of what we need** I /we deserve it, therefore...In the 1970s A was a shop-steward at the major employer in this English city. Several thousand men (and a few women) had incredibly well-paid jobs earning easily twice the national average wage. A decision was taken by the Union this particular year to demand a bumper pay rise. The management pleaded that any pay rise would bankrupt the viable company. The Union ordered the workers out on strike for a few weeks, if I remember correctly. I’m not sure if they ever went back to work. It was a total disaster for that wider community as every one of those employees landed on the dole queue. Looking back A was embarrassed to admit the reckless foolishness of the Union officials in assuming that there were ever larger pots of money waiting to be shared out by the workforce –no thought of the consequences. It can be so subtil the adverts entice us to purchase the latest clothes, cars, furniture or whatever to show that we are with it. Knowing the difference between needs and wants is so important. It could save a home from being repossessed, a marriage from collapsing under a pile of debt and a next generation knowing how to handle money. Success that is earned by hard work in a career; by dedicated training in a sport or with a musical instrument; or a reward that has

been waited for will be much more satisfying than benefits that land on our lap without any effort on our part.

### 3. Countering Covetousness

(a)**Recognise it and be realistic** In the moral realm it is easy to lapse into thinking person ‘x’ whom we don’t really know will be more exciting and the relationship with them more thrilling than the one we currently enjoy. King David’s disastrous lusting after Bathsheba had such appalling consequences for so many people (II Samuel 11). Coveting so easily can lead to jealousy and envy of others. King Ahab (I Kings 21) had affixation with a small vineyard adjacent to the palace property. He wanted it and offered to pay handsomely for it, but its owner a modest God-fearing man called Naboth had no interest in a larger vineyard or a cash payment, he was content with what he had in life. Here was a man whose worldly goods did not even register on the scale of the possessions of the Royal family nearby, yet he was happier and more fulfilled than they could ever dream of. It was because with his work, attitude to possessions and family life Naboth had realistic views on each area. He wasn’t trying to raise the perfect family; he had no desire to get such a big vineyard that he would have no time for his family –working to live not living to work. This latter point is a particular problem in the United Kingdom, compared to most other European countries. Too often an individual might be well-grounded in their views, but pressure from others in their family or workplace pressure them into making choices that are not particularly wise. When we see we have a problem in some particular area –maybe the best option is to seek out a friend of the same gender to whom we can be accountable to ensure we stick to our principles and make the right choices. Paul, very courageously, as he wrote the letter to the Church at Rome as an appeal for funds to assist proposed church-planting work in Spain, admitted he struggled with covetousness. In Romans 7:7-8 the great apostle wrote: *What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’<sup>8</sup> But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. He rightly didn’t go into details, but allowed these younger Christians to see that even Christians who have been on the faith journey for years still struggle at times with very real challenges to their faith. In Genesis 4 there is the shocking account of Cain killing his brother Abel. It began with jealousy concerning the fact that the Lord appreciated Abel’s offering more than Cain’s. The reason for this is probably because Abel offered the sacrifice that God wanted him to bring. However, Genesis 4:4b-7 highlights the problem that had arisen: *The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering,<sup>5</sup> but on Cain and his offering He did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.<sup>6</sup> Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?<sup>7</sup> If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.’* The same question comes to all of us – will we be controlled by our impulses and desires or will we have them under control as we take the key decisions of our lives? In the famous parable of the Sower that Jesus told, one of the responses illustrated the problem highlighted by this commandment. Mark 4:18-19 states: *Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word;<sup>19</sup> but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.* Coveting can lead to such a distortion of our priorities in life and our perspective on choices before us that we can make mistakes that could so easily have been avoided.*

(b)**See through the illusion** Covetousness promises what it cannot deliver –happiness and contentment with what we have. It can never deliver on these promises. A number of National lottery winners have branded their wins, in hindsight, as one of the worst days of their lives, because instead of bringing the best quality of life they could imagine it tore

families and friendships apart as a result of unrealistic expectations. An anonymous poet once wrote:

Money can buy medicine, but it cannot buy health.

Money can buy a house, but not a home.

Money can buy companionship, but not friendship.

Money can buy entertainment, but not happiness.

Money can buy food, but not an appetite.

Money can buy a degree, but not an education

Money can buy a bed, but not sleep

Money can buy a crucifix, but not a Saviour

Money can buy insurance, but not security

Arthur Schopenhauer the philosopher once said: ‘coveting is like sea water; the more we drink the thirstier we become.’ Jesus told the story concerning a rich farmer in Luke 12:13-21 to warn about the dangers of covetousness. *Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.’*<sup>14</sup> *Jesus replied, ‘Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?’*<sup>15</sup> *Then he said to them, ‘Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.’*<sup>16</sup> *And he told them this parable: ‘The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. <sup>17</sup>He thought to himself, “What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.”*<sup>18</sup> *Then he said, “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. <sup>19</sup>And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”*<sup>20</sup> *But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”*<sup>21</sup> *‘This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves **but is not rich towards God.**’* This man thought he had every base covered, but never considered that his time on earth was in God’s hands.

**(c) Realise that fear feeds covetousness** Do I really need to be afraid. Many people fear running out of money so they risk ‘killing’ themselves working to gain enough of it. Our security can only truly be in our relationship with God. Therefore, grasping this point puts the rest into perspective. David in Psalm 27 stated some beautiful words: *The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? <sup>2</sup>When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall. <sup>3</sup>Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. ... I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. <sup>14</sup>Wait for the Lord be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord (Psalm 27:1-3, 13-14).* What if I never meet the man /woman of my dreams and my hopes of marriage are dashed? What if the career I trained for never materialises? What if my health gives way and my quality of life diminishes? What if ....The list is endless, but it can rob you of the joy of the Lord and the sense of fulfilment He intends for each of us as His children. In Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus said to His disciples these words: *‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup>But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* Where is your heart and mine this morning? In the Bible it has been stated that God says to His people: *Do not fear...*<sup>370</sup> times –doesn’t this statistic point to a deep-seated human problem that may need to be addressed?

#### 4. Cultivate Contentment

(a) **Keep your heart in the right place** Give God the first place in your life. Ask Him to take away desires for things that are not priorities for your life. Ask Him to give you the best desires for that which is most important and to be able to bring that through to fruition in daily life. When our heart is in the right place we can overcome some surprising levels of adversity. In Philippians 1 the apostle Paul mentions that some professing Christians sought to take advantage of his imprisonment to advance their cause, through some form of evangelistic preaching in the public square. Philippians 1:15-18 states: *It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. <sup>16</sup>The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. <sup>17</sup>The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. <sup>18</sup>But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. **Yes, and I will continue to rejoice...*** Only the Holy Spirit can keep us focussed and on track in our faith in such circumstances.

(b) **Develop an attitude of gratitude** In the same letter to the Church at Philippi, the apostle Paul wrote these words from his prison cell: <sup>10</sup>*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. <sup>11</sup>I am not saying this because I am in need, **for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.** <sup>12</sup>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>13</sup>I can do all this through Him who gives me strength** (Philippians 4:10-13). He continually exhorts these believers to take delight in their blessings. Philippians 4:4 states: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!* What an incredible statement and from someone who lived it! List and focus on the blessings you have and keep it in a safe place to bring out again when you are feeling down and struggling. God is good-all the time, even when we neither feel it nor see it in our personal experience, because He cannot but be true to Himself.*

(c) **Be a wise steward of what you possess** We are stewards not owners –one day all the things we have will have either perished or belong to someone else. In Luke 12:48b Jesus said: *From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.* It is not how much or how little I have, but what I do with what I have that counts. This fact is of crucial importance.

(d) **Focus on your priorities** Romans 8:18: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* We live in the present, in the light of eternity. Jesus said: *It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20:35). What might this look like in my life if Jesus is in total charge? Some questions to reflect on:

What do you think about most? What do you like to talk about the most with enthusiasm? What do you spend proportionately most money on? What do you give most time to? The old chorus says: ‘Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face; and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace’ (CMP712 chorus), Amen.