

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 24, 2025
9:30 AM

Scripture: Exodus 20:17 & Matthew 6:25-33

Theme: Words of Life: Contentment: You Must Not Envy

[prayer]

We have at last arrived at the final commandment, the tenth commandment, in our summer worship series on the Decalogue: *Thou shall not covet*.

Covet is an uncommon word today, so we often paraphrase this commandment as a prohibition against envy or jealousy. Perhaps you have heard jealousy personified as “the green-eyed monster.” The phrase was coined by William Shakespeare in his play *Othello*. The character Iago remarks that jealousy is “the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.” Shakespeare may have been inspired by the image of a cat with glowing green eyes maliciously toying with its prey.

(As an aside, my cat has green eyes, and she absolutely covets. She covets the exact center of my mattress. It is absurd the sleeping positions I will contort my body into so as not to disturb eight pounds of warm, purring fluff.)

Jealousy is like a cat playing with its prey. Who is the prey in this scenario? It is you and I. Jealousy torments us like a cat torments a mouse. The Hebrew word for covet, *chamad*, means a persistent craving for more, especially what belongs to another person. This craving is so consuming that we will do nearly anything to satisfy it, including harming ourselves or others.

In the opening chapters of Genesis, we read that God planted a beautiful garden. This garden was full of every fruit tree we can imagine. The fruit was “desirable” and “pleasing,” both forms of the Hebrew word *chamad*. God then placed a man and a woman in the garden, and He told them that they could eat any fruit they like except for fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

What happens next? The two humans eat that fruit. It's predictable. When we are told we cannot have something, for many of us that something just becomes even more desirable. After God tells Adam and Eve that they may not eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Scripture says that they began to *chamad* – to desire, to covet – that fruit. A talking snake, which represents temptation (not necessarily Satan or the Devil, as is commonly taught), helps Eve rationalize her desire. *Did God really say?*

Rev. Adam Hamilton points out that “In [Eve’s] exchanges with the snake, we see a sin before the sin of eating the forbidden fruit. It was a sin of the heart, in which Adam and Eve desired what was not theirs to take...We, like Adam and Eve, know there are things that are off-limits, things God says we should not have. But the very fact that they are forbidden piques our desire. We’ve all heard the serpent rationalize with us – that voice in our heads or the voices of others, attempting to convince us it’s our right to have what we should not have – until finally we pick the forbidden fruit and eat it. As with Adam and Eve, the result is often shame, alienation, and guilt.”¹

Do not desire and try to take your neighbor’s house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor’s wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

The specific material belongings listed in the tenth commandment – and yes, that included a man’s wife and servants, who were considered property in ancient Israel – is not exhaustive. We can covet all kinds of things – property, people, wealth, power, status, praise. In many ways the sin of coveting is the first sin on the slippery slope to violating the other nine commandments. It can lead to violence and adultery and theft and lying. It can lead us to dishonor our most important relationships. It most certainly can lead to blasphemy and idolatry. The Decalogue is bookended by the first and tenth commandments for a reason: The first commandment declares we should have no other gods before Yahweh, while the tenth commandment highlights the kinds of gods our fickle human hearts frequently desire over Him.

¹ Adam Hamilton in *Words of Life: Jesus and the Promise of the Ten Commandments Today* (New York: Convergent Books, 2020), 202.

Destructive desire is the root of sin. I qualify desire with “destructive” for a reason. Desire is neither a good nor a bad thing – it is simply a human thing. What makes desire good or bad is the *object* of our desire and the fruit it bears in our lives. We can and absolutely should desire good things for ourselves and for others. The Apostle Paul writes in his Letter to the Philippians, “If anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise” (4:8 CEB). These are the things that will keep our hearts and minds safe in Jesus Christ.

Desire becomes destructive

- When we act immorally in order to get what we want;
- When we fixate on something that belongs to another person or that God has said we cannot have;
- When we overspend our time and energy, put ourselves in debt, or neglect our obligations to others in pursuit of the thing we want;
- And when the thing we desire becomes an idol.

During the pandemic, my sister and I would leave our apartment complex and take long walks around our neighborhood in Olympia and admire our neighbors’ homes. We lived in a spacious two-bedroom apartment in a safe and quiet part of town, but we also desired very much to own a house one day. We wanted this because we were tired of spending a lot of money on rent every month but not being able to invest that money in future equity. Our desire to own a house was reasonable, even wise. But it would have crossed over into coveting if we had become fixated on owning one of the homes in that neighborhood at the expense of caring for our apartment. We would have been coveting if we had attempted to purchase one of those houses before we were financially ready. We would have been coveting if we had become so consumed by our desire to be homeowners that we were ungrateful for the adequate housing God had already given us.

Comparison, it is said, is the thief of joy. I have also learned it is the gateway to coveting.

Five years later we are now homeowners in a neighborhood like the one we used to walk in Olympia. God was faithful to provide the home we needed in God’s

timing. Now we walk around our new neighborhood and admire our new neighbors' homes. And I have noticed on our walks how the temptation to compare creeps in. "Wouldn't it be nice if we had a bigger yard for the dog?" we might say to each other. "Or a bigger front porch?" "Or bigger bedrooms?"

The tenth commandment is concerned with curbing acquisitiveness. It is concerned with our desire to acquire what we do not need. It combats the very capitalist notion that bigger is better and more means happiness. It challenges us to discern between what we want and what we really need.

The market teaches us to consume. It teaches us that the main activity of our lives is to acquire and accumulate. Consumption does not always equal covetousness. But when my craving to consume begins to consume *me* – my time, energy, and money that should have been spent on something else – then it crosses the line into covetousness and greed. Unbridled consumerism is not a victimless activity. When we consume resources at the expense of other people and the earth, we are trespassing against our neighbor. We are trespassing against the covenant community God intends us to live in where everyone has enough. The Decalogue teaches us what living in right relationship with God and our neighbors looks like. When we covet we put our desire to acquire above our desire to be in right relationship with our neighbor. And when we are not in right relationship with our neighbor, we are not in right relationship with God. In God's kingdom, the desire to acquire and accumulate is replaced with the desire to honor each other by sharing what we have and learning the virtue of being content with "enough" instead of "more."

A couple weeks ago, when I preached on the seventh commandment (*Do not steal*), I said that the root of greed is a fear of scarcity. We are afraid that there is not enough to go around. Jesus addresses this fear in his Sermon on the Mount. Every living thing has the instinct to survive, but only human beings are preoccupied with the future. Other creatures do not "tax their lives with forethought of grief." They do not sow or harvest or toil or spin against the unknown. Their peace comes from being rooted in the present.

God meant for us to have the same kind of peace and contentment as other creatures; these are perhaps our greatest loss when Adam and Eve ate that forbidden fruit. Jesus was alluding to our creation story when he taught the

disciples not to worry about the necessities of life. “Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are?” (Matt 5:26).

Jesus knows that we have real needs. But he also teaches that when our honest work is not enough to cover those needs, the miracle of God’s care for God’s people is worked out through God’s kingdom, where we look out for each other and share what we have. The challenge before each of us is not to dilute the words of Jesus to fit the economic values of our time. “You cannot serve God and mammon,” Jesus said (Matt 6:24). Mammon is a transliteration of the Aramaic word *mamona*, and the root of *mamona* is *‘aman*, which means “trust/reliance.” So, the literal meaning of *mammon* is “the thing one puts their trust in other than God.” Jesus uses the word *mammon* to provoke a stark choice in his disciples: Which do you trust more – God or stuff?

Discipleship is a constant process of letting go of everything in our lives that seeks to dethrone Jesus as our Lord and Savior. And the only way to truly let go is to trust that God is sufficient for our every need. Jesus teaches that if we are focused on acquiring things, we will always worry. We will worry about how to get what we need. We will worry about how to keep what we have. And we will wonder: When is enough, enough?

Do you know what sounds like *mammon* but means the opposite? *Manna*. “What is it?” asked the Israelites in the desert (Ex 16). They were hungry and pleaded with Moses to take them back to Egypt; at least they knew where to find food when they were slaves. And so, God gave them bread from heaven...but only enough for each day so that they would learn to rely on God alone.

Give us this day our daily bread. Jesus commands us to leave behind the values of our culture and instead live a life of trust and obedience to God. Our deep anxiety is that if we follow the command of Jesus, there will not be enough for our needs. But Jesus tells us not to be anxious about anything, because the One who calls us to the radical life of a disciple is also the Creator of the universe who lovingly provides for all of creation.

Contentment is the opposite of covetousness. We cultivate contentment by keeping our hearts and minds fixed on the things of God. When we focus our desire on God – to know, love, and serve Him – we find the kind of satisfaction the

world cannot give. Jesus says, “Desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:33). Our first desire, according to Jesus and according to the first commandment, should be to pursue the will of God. And the will of God is to learn to love Him and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. As Paul teaches in his Letter to the Romans,

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:8-10 NRSVUE).

May our keeping of these ten commandments be to each of us a calling to grow in the Law of Love that leads to life.

Let us pray:

Thank you, O Lord, for the gift of these Ten Commandments. Jesus, help us to live them as you interpreted them. Forgive us for the many ways we have violated them. Help us to trust in you, to walk with you, and to love you. And help us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. May these words be for us guardrails and guideposts. May our hearts and liives be shaped by you and defined by these sacred words of life. Amen.²

² Adapted from a prayer by Adam Hamilton, *Words of Life*, 221.