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THE REAL PROBLEMS WITH COVETOUSNESS

We know that all of us are sinners, right? We have all sinned many times. We have all come short of the glory of God (see Romans 3:23). And that was the case even more so before we came to the point of real repentance, before the time when we unconditionally submitted our lives to God and to His will.

Do you know what was **the very first sin you ever committed**, the very first time you ever broke the laws of God? The chances are that it was the same as the very first sin I ever committed, and the same as the very first sin every other person ever committed.

While we were still in early childhood, long before we were ever capable of potentially having other "gods" or taking God's name in vain or breaking the Sabbath or potentially engaging in any sinful activity like killing and stealing, we were already committing this particular sin. We committed this type of sin even before we had fully developed the ability to speak with any degree of fluency. We were already committing this sin when we were only two years old.

What was that very first sin that all of us committed? How did we break the laws of God when we were only two years old? **That sin was coveting!** We wanted the things we saw other people have, or other children play with or use. As small children, perhaps one to two years old, **we tried to take things that we wanted to have**. And if the other child or the adult denied us the thing we wanted, then we made our displeasure and our resentment known by screaming, crying, sulking, pouting, rebelling, etc.

When small children want to get something, and then express anger and resentment when they don't get what they want, then they are coveting the thing that they want.

Small children do a lot of coveting!

In most cases such childhood coveting is not confronted in our modern society. **Modern child rearing encourages parents to give in to a great deal of such childhood coveting**, trying to satisfy the demands of their children, trying to appease and to placate their children. And the conduct of such children is never ever identified as coveting. Rather, such coveting conduct is almost always excused as being "natural" and "normal" for small children.

We need to recognize coveting in all its forms. We need to recognize that the "spirit that works in the children of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2) does so already by around age one year, when "that spirit" inspires covetousness in a small child's mind. And the child, who has obviously not yet built any kind of resistance to outside impulses, will promptly act out those impulses in an unrestrained way. Coveting is the very first sin all of us ever committed.

The motivation underlying most of God's commandments is readily apparent. The commandments to not have other gods and to not make graven images and to not take God's name in vain guard our relationship with God, that we don't put anyone or anything else ahead of God in our lives. Similarly, the commandments to not kill or commit adultery or steal or bear false witness against anyone guard our relationships with fellow man, that we don't in any way wrong other people.

Overtly all of these commandments are aimed at regulating our speech and conduct and behavior. That also applies to the commandments to keep the Sabbath and to honor our parents; they also are aimed at

influencing what we say and do.

But what about the last one of the ten commandments? What is the intent underlying that particular commandment? Here is the tenth commandment:

You shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that *is* thy neighbor's. (Exodus 20:17)

This commandment doesn't focus on our speech or conduct or behavior. This commandment has a different underlying focus from the other commandments. Instead of trying to influence what we say and do, **this commandment is aimed at influencing and guiding how we think**, how we use our minds. Coveting is a mental activity.

How we use our minds throughout our lives is often determined and established in very early childhood. Whenever you see a small child demanding something, demanding anything, then you are witnessing "the prince of the power of the air" working in the mind of that small child. To give in to the demands of that small child amounts to giving in to Satan; it amounts to letting Satan have his way.

In those type of situations the real conflict is always over who will have the dominant influence over the young child's developing mind: the parent or Satan?

Now we could break this tenth commandment without ever physically **doing** anything that is wrong before God. We could also break this commandment without ever **saying** anything that is wrong in God's eyes.

This commandment focuses on certain types of thoughts that we are not to think!

It is our thoughts that then lead to actions. Right thoughts lead to right actions and wrong thoughts lead to wrong actions. Our actions are a consequence of our thoughts.

THE MEANING OF "COVET"

In the Old Testament there are several different Hebrew words which are at times translated as "covet" or "coveting" or "covetousness". And in the New Testament there are several different Greek words that are at times also translated with these English words. So let's look at the concept of coveting more closely. We'll start by first looking at our English word "covet".

The English word "covet" means (Webster's Dictionary):

1. To wish for **enviously**,

2. To desire **inordinately** or **culpably**,

3. To feel **inordinate desire** for what belongs to another.

This English word "covet" always has a negative meaning, as is indicated by the words "enviously", "culpably" and "inordinately". It denotes a wrong kind of desire. So we would never use the word "covet" to refer to a feeling or desire that is right and good before God. When we see the word "covet", then we know that it refers to something that is negative and unacceptable

before God. "Covet" never has a positive meaning in English.

However, when we look at the Hebrew word in Exodus 20:17 that is in the commandment translated as "covet", then we find a word with a much broader range of meanings than can be ascribed to our English word "covet". Here is the commandment with the key Hebrew word included:

"You shall not **covet** (Hebrew "**chamad**") your neighbor's house, you shall not **covet** (Hebrew "**chamad**") your neighbor's wife ... nor any thing that *is* your neighbor's."

The Hebrew word "chamad" is used twice by God in this verse.

The Hebrew word "chamad" is used 21 times in the Old Testament, but in the KJV it is translated only four times as "covet", indicating that coveting is not its primary meaning. Let's look at some of the other places where "chamad" is used. In the following Scriptures I have rendered the translations for "chamad" in bold letters for easier recognition. Consider the following Scriptures:

And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is **pleasant** ("chamad") to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:9)

And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant (Hebrew "ta'avah") to the eyes, and a tree **to be desired** ("chamad") to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. (Genesis 3:6)

The graven images of their gods shall you burn with fire: **you shall not desire** ("chamad") the silver or gold *that is* on them, nor take *it* unto you, lest you be snared therein: for it *is* an abomination to the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 7:25)

Surely he shall not feel quietness in his belly, he shall not save of that **which he desired** ("chamad"). (Job 20:20)

More to be desired ("chamad") *are they* than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:10)

When You with rebukes do correct man for iniquity, **You make his beauty** ("chamad") to consume away like a moth: surely every man *is* vanity. Selah. (Psalm 39:11)

Why leap you, you high hills? *this is* the hill *which* God **desires** ("chamad") to dwell in; yes, the LORD will dwell *in it* for ever. (Psalm 68:16)

There is treasure **to be desired** ("chamad") and oil in the dwelling of the wise; but a foolish man spends it up. (Proverbs 21:20)

For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see Him, *there is* no beauty that **we should desire** ("chamad") Him. (Isaiah 53:2)

The above nine uses of "chamad" make clear that this Hebrew word translated as "covet" in the tenth commandment also has some positive meanings. "Chamad" is not always something bad. In fact, the main meaning of this verb "chamad" is "**to desire**, **to take pleasure**". The word "chamad" is even used for something that God does in Psalm 68:16. And in Genesis 2:9 it is used to describe all of the trees that God had created. And in Psalm 19:10 we are actively encouraged to "chamad" God's righteous

judgments.

Clearly, "chamad" **may** involve a way of thinking that is "envious, culpable and inordinate". But the word "chamad" can **also apply to** things that are **pleasant** and **beautiful** and **desirable**, without in any way whatsoever implying something "envious, culpable or inordinate".

So how can one word (i.e. "chamad") at the same time mean **something that is bad** and which we are to avoid (i.e. in Exodus 20:17), and also mean **something that is good** and which we are encouraged to actively do (i.e. in Psalm 19:10)?

The word "chamad" means "to desire", an activity that takes place in our minds. The real difference between "coveting" on the one hand and "desiring to understand God's judgments" on the other hand is **the focus of our thinking**.

Instead of translating "chamad" as "covet" in Exodus 20:17, as an exercise let's translate it as "desire", which translation also happens to be in full agreement with the meaning of "chamad". Here is what we then have:

You shall not desire your neighbor's house, you shall not desire your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that *is* your neighbor's. (Exodus 20:17)

When "chamad" is translated this way, then we can't just infer a negative meaning to the word "desire", since our English language word "desire" most assuredly also has good positive meanings and applications. So then we are forced to look at the focus of the desire that is spelled out. **What is the focus of the desires that are forbidden?**

While "coveting" per se is clearly wrong and forbidden, "desiring" per se is not inherently wrong or forbidden at all. What is wrong and forbidden is to desire something that belongs to someone else, as in **anything that belongs to our neighbor**.

While this is not absolutely necessary to be the case every time, in general terms this commandment implies that "our neighbor" is richer and better off than we are, and that he can therefore readily afford to have the things and possessions which we end up coveting or desiring. So **this commandment tells us how to think about people who are wealthier and in some way better off than we are**.

We like to abbreviate things. So we sometimes abbreviate the tenth commandment as saying "**you shall not covet**". We can do that because the meaning of the English word "covet" is restricted to negative and culpable thoughts and emotions.

But we would never be able to abbreviate the tenth commandment as "**you shall not desire**". That's because our word "desire" doesn't necessarily imply something negative or culpable. Therefore **if** we were to translate "chamad" as "desire" in Exodus 20:17, **then** we would always have to mention the specific focal points of all the desires that are forbidden.

And **that is exactly what God has done** in the tenth commandment, because the word God used is not restricted to a negative meaning. There is a Hebrew word that basically means "to covet", i.e. there is a word which is restricted to negative applications. We'll look at that word later, but that is not the word God used in the commandment.

Instead, in the commandment God used a word that means "to desire", and then God spelled out very specifically all of the things we are not to desire, starting out with the houses and spouses and business

enterprises (i.e. the "manservants" and "maidservants") that belong to other people, and concluding with "any thing that is your neighbor's".

To identify desires that focus on things that belong to other people, including desiring their spouses, we have the words "covet" and "covetous" in English. And there is a word in Hebrew that basically also has those specific meanings. But that is not the Hebrew word God used.

Let's now look at how Moses restated this commandment 40 years later, shortly before the Israelites crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land.

THE TENTH COMMANDMENT RESTATED

In Deuteronomy chapter 5 Moses recalled that "the LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb" (Deuteronomy 5:2). Moses continued with: "the LORD talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire ... saying ..." (Deuteronomy 5:4-5).

Then Moses repeated the ten commandments **from memory**, without consulting the actual text of the words God had spoken almost 40 years earlier in Exodus 20. The result is that Deuteronomy 5 presents very minor changes in wording from the text in Exodus 20. Those changes reflect Moses' own recollection of Exodus 20; they don't mean that God Himself somehow altered the wording of His original ten commandments.

Exodus 20 gives us God's commandments, **as God gave them**. And Deuteronomy 5 gives us how Moses recalled those commandments from memory almost 40 years later. The minor differences in wording between these two accounts show us that in a few places Moses recalled God's commandments in words that are slightly different from the words God had actually spoken about 40 years earlier. While it is interesting to note these minor differences, they do not have any significance, as far as our responses to God and our obligations to God are concerned. But we should take note of those minor differences.

So let's now look at how Moses restated the original tenth commandment.

Neither shall you **desire** (Hebrew "chamad") your neighbor's wife, neither shall you **covet** (Hebrew "avah") your neighbor's house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or any *thing* that *is* your neighbor's. (Deuteronomy 5:21)

Notice that here Moses actually used two different Hebrew verbs in reference to wrong desires, desires that are forbidden by God, where God had used the one same Hebrew word for both cases. For "coveting" a neighbor's wife Moses used the verb "chamad", the same word as in Exodus 20:17. But for "coveting" a neighbor's house Moses used the verb "avah", rather than "chamad". Notice also that here the translators freely translated "chamad" as "desire", as I have done above for Exodus 20:17.

Let's understand that it is not really "a big deal" that Moses from memory unintentionally reversed the correct order of not coveting your neighbor's house and wife to the switched order of not coveting your neighbor's wife and house. The order of these two things doesn't really make a difference.

[Comment: The same thing is also true for **the sequence** of the ten commandments, for example. Where Exodus 20 lists the sequence "don't kill, don't commit adultery, don't steal", Mark 10:19 lists the sequence "don't commit adultery, don't kill, don't steal". And Luke lists the 5th commandment out of place in Luke 18:20, where Luke wrote "don't commit adultery, don't kill, don't steal, don't bear false

witness, honor your father and your mother". And **the Apostle Paul himself also got the sequence wrong** in Romans 13:9, where Paul wrote "don't commit adultery, don't kill, don't steal ...". The point is that Jesus Christ during His ministry undoubtedly stated the correct sequence of "don't kill, commit adultery, steal", but Mark, Luke and Paul got it mixed up, which is really immaterial. What is important is **what** God has actually commanded, rather than the order in which those commands were given. When we are expected to live by all of God's laws, then the order of the commandments is actually not that important.]

Anyway, where in Exodus 20:17 the translators rendered both instances of "chamad" into English as "covet", here in Deuteronomy 5:21 the translators rendered "chamad" as "desire", which is certainly appropriate; and "avah" they rendered as "covet".

Now the Hebrew word "avah" likewise has positive and negative applications. It also basically means "to desire". Here in Deuteronomy 5:21 it is used with the negative application (i.e. we are not to desire what belongs to someone else). But a few chapters later it is used with a positive application for the things we desire to buy at God's feasts with our second tithe. Notice:

And you shall bestow that money for whatsoever your soul **lusts after** (Hebrew "avah"), for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever your soul **desires** (Hebrew "sha'al"): and you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you, and your household, (Deuteronomy 14:26)

When the KJV was translated in 1611, the verb "to lust after" still had the meaning "to desire", without implying our modern negative meaning of the verb "to lust". Many other translations have appropriately translated Deuteronomy 14:26 as "... your soul desires". 400 years ago the verbs "to lust" and "to desire" were largely synonymous. But in modern English Deuteronomy 14:26 should not read "... whatsoever your soul lusts after", because today we attach a different meaning to the verb "to lust".

It seems that the KJV translators decided on the translation "whatsoever your soul lusts after" because they wanted to translate the Hebrew verb "sha'al" in this verse as "desires", to retain some slight distinction between the Hebrew verbs "avah" and "sha'al". But the word "sha'al" is not really focused on "desiring". Rather, "sha'al" simply means "to ask". So a better way to translate this reference to the use of second tithe in today's English is:

And you shall bestow that money for whatsoever your soul **desires** (Hebrew "avah"), for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever your soul **asks for** (Hebrew "sha'al"): and you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you, and your household, (Deuteronomy 14:26)

Implied is that "your soul" will ask for things that are perfectly acceptable in the sight of God, and not for something that would constitute coveting or lusting.

In modern English the words "coveting" and "lusting" should **never** be used anywhere in the Bible for desires that are **not** "envious, inordinate or culpable", i.e. they should never be used for desires that are perfectly acceptable in the sight of God.

GOOD DESIRES

In the original commandment we are told that we are not to desire our neighbor's house or wife or domestic animals or anything that belongs to our neighbor.

So here is the point:

1) It is assuredly not wrong for a single man to desire to find a wife. The desire to get married is encouraged by God Himself. It was God who said that "it is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

So God's commandment does not address the desire of wanting to get married per se. It really addresses **the focus** of that desire. We are not to desire another person's spouse.

2) Likewise, it is assuredly not wrong for us to desire to acquire a house for us to call "home". God in His Word encourages us to build houses for ourselves. That is the principle in the following verses.

And **they shall build houses**, and inhabit *them*; and they shall **plant vineyards**, and eat the fruit of them. (Isaiah 65:21)

And they shall dwell safely therein, and **shall build houses**, and **plant vineyards**; yea, they shall dwell with confidence, when I have executed judgments upon all those that despise them round about them; and they shall know that I *am* the LORD their God. (Ezekiel 28:26)

So God's commandment does not address the desire to own our own homes. Once again the commandment addresses **the focus** of our desire for houses and vineyards. We are not to desire houses and vineyards and lands that belong to someone else, like King Ahab did when he coveted the vineyard of Naboth (see 1 Kings 21:1-4).

So the focus of the tenth commandment is not to curb natural desires to get married and to have a home and a means for providing adequately for our own families.

The focus of the commandment is: don't desire the things that belong to someone else, and don't desire to marry someone who is already married to someone else. Those things would constitute coveting!

A PRINCIPLE FOR THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

Now the principle of "don't desire your neighbor's wife" also assuredly applies to the following situation:

Don't desire to marry someone who does not want to marry you!

If you do desire to marry someone who does not want to marry you, then **you are coveting**! You very selfishly want what you want, even though the other person doesn't want to marry you! If you then pressure the other person to marry you, or you trick them and trap them into marrying you, or you coerce them into marrying you, then you are guilty of coveting that other person! And you are breaking the commandment! And then you will pay and things will not work out well for you.

Had you understood that before? **To pressure someone into marrying you is a form of covetousness**, because it pressures the other person to accept a choice that they of their own free will didn't really want to accept. You pressured them into accepting that choice. It is **extreme selfishness** to pressure someone into marrying us, with a total disregard for the wishes and desires of that other person, and this situation is covered by the tenth commandment. The overwhelming majority of our so-called "love songs" are really nothing other than **songs of coveting**.

Do you understand the principle here?

To covet means to desire to have something that someone else cannot or does not want to give or sell to you. To force someone to marry you means that you take something from them that they don't want to part with ... their freedom of choice to marry someone other than you or even to not marry at all.

There is another group of situations to which the tenth commandment also applies.

For many of the things we may desire there is someone out there willing to sell them to us. So if we have enough money, then in addition to buying food, we can buy many of the things we desire to have (houses, cars, furniture, appliances, clothing, an education, vacations, etc.) from perfectly acceptable supply sources.

The problem with coveting arises when we desire to have things that we are in fact not able to pay for, and we cannot really afford to buy them. **But we still want those things anyway**, even though we can't afford them. Other people can afford those things, but we can't. But we convince ourselves that we really must have those things, because everyone else all around us has them. And so we simply go into debt to have them.

Coveting enters the picture when we buy things that we cannot actually pay for! **Coveting enters the picture when we go into debt in order to buy the things we want to have right now!**

And we pay very heavily for such coveting. We have trillions of dollars of private debt! And our government has racked up trillions of dollars of public debt. Covetousness bankrupts both governments and private individuals. Covetousness is a form of slavery, enslaving people who covet things they cannot really afford.

The fact that a large portion of the population is heavily in debt is a major fact of life in our society today. And that fact constitutes the most glaring symptom of nation-wide covetousness. **A society steeped in debt is a covetous society.**

Yes, there are a few legitimate reasons for going into debt, like paying for accidents and emergencies and necessities just to stay alive, etc. And covetousness certainly doesn't apply to credit card expenditures that are paid off in full every month, or even every few months. It is not that we need to restrict ourselves to always paying cash. It is a matter of restricting ourselves to expenditures that we are easily able to afford.

In our present age most debt is racked up by **spending in order to have things that we are not really able to afford**. So people are endlessly paying off their debts. In some cases people look for others, including the government and the taxpayers, to pay off their debts; they want their debts of covetousness just blotted out, without having to make any further payments.

OUR WHOLE WORLD IS BUILT ON COVETOUSNESS

We desire to produce a lot of goods because we want to sell those goods, so that we can have more money. And we want more money so that we can then afford to buy all the things we desire, things which other people have produced.

But producing a lot of stuff is of no value to us unless we can persuade other people to buy all that stuff

from us. So once we as a society are set up to produce a lot of goods or services, then **we need to stimulate a market** for those goods and services. In effect, we need to persuade other people to want and to desire and to covet the things we are offering for sale. We need to motivate other people to give us their money for our goods and services.

So we then advertize our goods to potential customers.

One major way of advertizing our goods is to **encourage people to covet the things we are offering them**. A great deal of advertizing in our modern world brazenly urges us to covet the things that are being advertized, to envy the people who own the luxury items that we see in the ads, and which items are almost invariably grossly overpriced (that's coveting on the part of the producers), and in that way the advertisers turn us into potential customers.

Nations seek to constantly increase their gross domestic product because it is a foregone conclusion that next year they want to spend more money than this year; next year they must have more than they have now. And if for some reason they don't have more next year, then they are going to spend more anyway, and simply go more into debt, meaning that they get someone else to pay for the things they want right now. **That is coveting.**

The concept that next year I must have more than I have now is a manifestation of covetousness. We won't need more food or drink or clothing next year than we need this year, but we still want to have more next year than we have this year. We almost always desire to have more next year than we have now.

Every single government on earth that runs an annual deficit is based on covetousness. The same is true on the personal individual level.

Governments are covetous because we as individuals are covetous. **We commonly desire to have things that we can't actually afford.** And coveting really takes no effort on our part, does it? After all, since early childhood it has been a part of our nature, right?

Without covetousness on the part of both the producers and the buyers our whole present world would collapse! Economies would come to a grinding halt. Whatever happens, we must always find buyers for the stuff we produce. We must always have money coming in. Without a constant stream of money coming in, our present world couldn't possibly survive.

And it is all based on covetousness, Satan's insatiable desire for more. Here is another point that is closely tied into covetousness.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE VALUES

We know that Satan is the unseen god of this present age (2 Corinthians 4:4), and it is clear that Satan is the one who originated coveting. It was Satan who coveted God's status and position and power (Isaiah 14:13-14). So Satan has established covetousness, **the desire for what belongs to someone else**, as a hallmark of the world he controls. The dominant ways of life in this present world are all built on covetousness.

Last year I wrote an article entitled "God Hates All Forms of Pride". In that article I spent some time discussing that Ezekiel 28:16 shows that Satan had invented a system of trading, which in practical terms forces us to think selfishly. That Satan-invented system of trading is a major vehicle for focusing

human minds on coveting.

Let’s consider that thought a bit more closely.

When Satan invented the concept of trading, he at the same time had to invent something else. Here is the point:

When Satan invented trading, he at the same time had to invent **a totally artificial system of values!** It is Satan’s way of thinking that attaches a greater value to a cow than to a chicken.

In this regard **we all think the same way that Satan thinks** and reasons, because we all without hesitation agree that a cow is obviously worth more than a chicken. From our perspective someone would have to be crazy to think that a cow and a chicken have the same value.

The whole concept of attaching a value to anything is totally artificial! God has created different things for different purposes. So if you want milk, then you try to get a cow and not a chicken. But if you want eggs, then you get some chickens and not a cow.

If you want watermelons, then you grow watermelons and not beans. But if you want beans, then you grow beans and not watermelons. Beans and watermelons serve different purposes, but that doesn’t inherently make the one more valuable than the other.

A horse is not more valuable than a butterfly, as far as God is concerned. God created both of them for different purposes, that’s all. For that matter, every part of the human body is just as valuable as every other part, even if we perhaps think of "less honorable" parts and more honorable parts of the human body (see Paul’s analogy in 1 Corinthians 12:22-23).

From God’s perspective a whole galaxy is not necessarily worth more than a single planet in some or other solar system. They serve different purposes, that’s all. But they don’t have different values. God can just as easily create a whole galaxy out in the universe, as God can create a planet somewhere. And to God one is not worth more than the other.

God has created different things for different purposes, but that doesn’t make some things more valuable than other things. Everything God has created has a value to God, but nothing God has created has a comparative value in relation to anything else that God has created. Everything that God does, without exception, has a value, but it is never more valuable or less valuable than anything else that God has done. God doesn’t ever do anything that is less valuable than other things that God does.

It was Satan who invented the concept of **attaching a relative value to everything**. That is essential if you want to engage in trading with other individuals. The concept of relative values is the foundation for the invention of money. Money becomes the yardstick for establishing a relative value for just about anything we might consider.

Consider a principle Jesus Christ expounded.

He that is **faithful in** that which is **least** is **faithful** also **in much**: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. (Luke 16:10)

What this tells us is that before God it is just as important to be faithful in what we consider to be "small things", as it is to be faithful in what we consider to be "big things". Equal importance before God means equal value before God.

We need to understand that in Luke 16:10 Jesus Christ was presenting a godly principle from our human perspective, because Christ was trying to explain something to us human beings. Disobedience "in that which is least" is just as serious as disobedience "in much". And the reason both cases are equally serious is because in the presence of God nothing has a comparative or relative value; before God everything is equally important. Before God there is no sliding scale of values or of importance.

James also explained that before God there is only one value for everything, that before God everything is equally important. That is the foundation for what James wrote in chapter 2.

For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all. (James 2:10)

When someone keeps the whole law except for one point, then that carries the same value as someone else breaking every single point in the law. And the same value in these two cases incurs the same penalty in both cases. That's because no point in the law is somehow more important or less important than any other point in the law.

For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if you commit no adultery, yet if you kill, **you become a transgressor of the law**. (James 2:11)

James compared adultery and murder. But the point is that every single law of God is just as important as every other law. James could equally correctly have said: "now if you don't commit adultery or kill, **yet if you covet**, you become a transgressor of the law".

The concept of money establishes the idea of relative values for all goods and services. And ascribing different values to different goods is a key component for facilitating covetousness. And that brings us to 1 Timothy 6:10, which we'll look at in a little while.

For now let's first look at some other Scriptures.

THE OMNIPRESENCE OF COVETOUSNESS

The Apostle Paul tells us that covetousness will be a major attribute for people "in the last days" (see 2 Timothy 3:1-2). And covetous people encourage others to also be covetous, and they praise and admire others who openly display their covetousness. For that matter, greed and covetousness are basically the same thing.

The prophet Jeremiah stated that the word of God is "a reproach" to the whole nation (see Jeremiah 6:10), and people don't really want to hear it. Jeremiah continued to say:

For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them **every one *is* given to covetousness** (Hebrew = "betsa"); and from the prophet even unto the priest **every one deals falsely**. (Jeremiah 6:13, repeated in Jeremiah 8:10)

"The least of them" includes the common people who are heavily in debt because they bought things they could not afford to pay for, and "the greatest of them" includes the leaders in government and in industry and the millionaires and billionaires in society. It also includes all the religious leaders, "from the prophet even unto the priest". **They all want more money.** This is a society that is totally and completely ruled by and dominated by covetousness. In our world today covetousness is the primary consideration for very many interactions amongst people.

In this Scripture the Hebrew word is not "chamad", the word for "desire". Here the Hebrew word is "betsa", a noun derived from the Hebrew verb "batsa". These Hebrew words "batsa" and "betsa" refer to a greed for gain, a greed for always wanting more. Like our English word "covetous", these Hebrew words are limited to a negative meaning; they always refer to something bad.

It is interesting to note that God chose to use the word "chamad" in the commandment, rather than the word "batsa", which would automatically have been restricted to the negative meanings inherent in the English words "covet" and "covetous". But God didn't use "betsa" or "batsa" in the commandment.

This should tell us that the commandment is not limited to desiring things that are wrong or unlawful, as for example desiring another person's spouse. That is obviously wrong. But coveting also applies to desiring things that are perfectly good in themselves under normal conditions.

It should tell us that **the commandment also includes desiring things that are in fact acceptable before God, but which things we are simply not able to afford**. The commandment is aimed at teaching us to control our minds and our desires in regard to the physical circumstances we may find ourselves in. We all need to learn the lesson that Paul had learned. As Paul explained: "**I have learned** in whatsoever state I am therewith **to be content**" (Philippians 4:11). That is mind control.

Covetousness also frequently rears its head when we seek in one way or another to **persuade other people to pay for the things we desire to have right now**. A man or a woman who is constantly demanding more from the other person in the marriage ("I want a new car ... a new house ... new clothes", etc.) is a covetous person. Covetousness is the opposite of contentment. A lack of contentment is a common symptom of covetousness.

Children, for example, covet very readily and very frequently, when they see what other children have and what other children do. Such **childhood coveting** is almost never dealt with in modern child-rearing practices.

The principle of always wanting more and never being satisfied with what we already have was well illustrated by Solomon in his proverbs. As Solomon said:

The horseleach hath two daughters, *crying*, **Give**, **give**. There are three *things that* are **never satisfied**, *yea*, four *things* say not, *It is* enough: (Proverbs 30:15)

Proverbs 30:15 illustrates quite well the attitude Jeremiah was describing in Jeremiah 6:13, one of never being satisfied, never having enough, always looking for ways to get more. Even millionaires and billionaires never have enough; they are "the sharks" who are always looking for ways to make still more money. Many of them will openly profess that they "love money", which is actually a rather sick perversion of the word "love".

Ezekiel made the same point about the pervasiveness of covetousness, but from a Church of God perspective.

And they come unto you as the people come, and **they sit before you *as* my people**, and they hear your words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they show much love, *but* **their heart goes after their covetousness** ... for **they hear your words, but they do them not**. (Ezekiel 33:31-32)

This is a prophecy about many of the people in God's Church, who dutifully appear before God's ministers every Sabbath. They talk about what fine sermons they are hearing, but they never let go of covetousness. **They don't recognize** their own covetousness, and **they never confront it** in order to deal with it. This Scripture was written for our age today!

Consider also a prophecy in the Book of Micah.

Woe to them that devise iniquity, and **work evil upon their beds**! when the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand. And **they covet** (Hebrew "chamad") **fields, and take *them* by violence**; and houses, and take *them* away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage. (Micah 2:1-2)

This is something that happens all the time in our world today: **people think up a scheme to get rich quickly**, and they don't care who they rip off, or whose lives are ruined in the process. Sometimes they use the secular laws to their full advantage, and at other times they break secular laws with disdain. But either way their attitude is: tough on the people who end up losing their savings or their wealth or even their health in the process; I'm just making some more money. Obviously, the people referred to here in Micah 2:1-2 are breaking the tenth commandment.

In our world today, even as in ancient times, **covetousness** is encouraged because in most cases it **is essential for business to prosper**; it is in most cases essential to get buyers. Covetous people are looked up to as somehow being great or important. As David observed in Psalm 10:

For **the wicked** boasts of his heart's desire, and **blesses the covetous**, *whom* the LORD abhors. (Psalm 10:3)

People seek the favor of covetous people. But covetousness exacts a heavy price: it destroys families. As Habakkuk said:

Woe to **him that covets** ("batsa") **an evil covetousness** ("betsa") **to his house**, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil! (Habakkuk 2:9)

Here "his house" is a reference to "his family", which will be destroyed by that "evil covetousness". People covet more because they are looking for security and protection from potential future problems. But God is not in the picture, and their covetousness will destroy them.

In speaking about "His people" in Isaiah 57:14 God says:

For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him: I hid me, and was wroth, and he went on frowardly (i.e. perversely) in the way of his heart. (Isaiah 57:17)

God is angered by covetousness. God hates covetousness. One reason is that all covetousness is always directed against God Himself, because God is the ultimate Owner of everything that exists anywhere. Covetousness is an expression of Satan's attitude towards God, his Creator. It is no wonder that covetousness is the first sin that Satan instills in us while we are still very young children.

If you can understand this point, then you should also be able to grasp that covetousness on our part is an expression of our attitude towards God. And covetousness is an attitude that God will not accept under any circumstances.

That's the real importance of the tenth commandment! So let me repeat that:

Covetousness is an expression of our attitude towards God!

Covetousness is a way of putting self ahead of God. Covetousness is tantamount to having another "god" before the true God. Covetousness is a way of thinking that disregards and resists God's status and position as the supreme owner of everything.

JESUS CHRIST'S TEACHINGS

Consider what Jesus Christ explained in Mark 7.

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, **covetousness**, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: **All these evil things come from within**, and defile the man. (Mark 7:21-23)

Covetousness originates in the mind, and it can thrive without ever manifesting itself in word or deed, though in practice it will in most cases manifest very readily in a person's speech as well as in a person's actions. And, as Jeremiah and Ezekiel both pointed out, covetousness is pretty well a universal problem.

We should note that Jesus Christ placed covetousness into the same category as murder, adultery, blasphemy and theft. The way of thinking that reveals itself in covetous speech or conduct is extremely bad in the sight of God, as I will show. We need to also recognize that while most people will not be ensnared all that easily to commit murder or theft or adultery, because all those things manifest in actual conduct, **it is very easy for even the most converted person amongst us to be ensnared by covetousness**, if we do not constantly guard our minds against the fiery arrows of covetousness.

The world we live in promotes and encourages covetousness, and our minds are constantly bombarded by temptations to covet the things other people have. Everybody around us, from the least unto the greatest, does it. It takes great effort to fight against the torrent of this world's covetousness. And when we do engage our minds in covetous ways of thinking, nobody else around us can see that. Only God can see that.

Jesus Christ also referred to this problem in Matthew 6.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will **hate the one**, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and **despise the other**. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. (Matthew 6:24)

Serving "mammon" is one of the plainest outward demonstrations of covetousness. As far as the application of the underlying principle here is concerned, it is equally correct to rephrase Jesus Christ's statement as "**you cannot serve God and covetousness**"! That hasn't stopped people from trying to serve both masters.

It is important to note that covetousness will engender a latent, even if not always overt, attitude of despising God's laws and God's ways. That's the problem with people in Ezekiel 33:31-32; the people take great care to hide their wrong attitude towards God's ways with an outward verbal show of "much love". Those people have a wrong attitude towards God's laws, an attitude that is dominated by their covetousness.

Let's also notice that this is an either/or matter, and it requires a conscious choice from us. Jesus Christ made clear that **we can't have it both ways**! If we love the one way of thinking (i.e. if we really want "mammon"), **then we are going to hate the other way of thinking**, the way of eager submission to God's whole way of life. Any man or woman who is motivated by covetousness (i.e. they "hold to the one") will have a hostility towards the real intent underlying God's laws and instructions (i.e. they "despise the other"). And conversely, any person who really "holds to" God's ways will hate and despise covetousness. Hopefully that is true for all of us. So we can test ourselves: do we really **hate** covetousness, or do we accept it and tolerate it? If we don't actively hate covetousness, then we are on

very dangerous ground before God.

Thus when you see in some people a certain reluctance to accept certain obvious implications of certain laws of God, perhaps even arguing against those obvious implications, understand that you are dealing with a mind that is "holding to mammon", a mind that is motivated by a desire to have more. Learn to discern the real attitudes of the people with whom you come into contact.

This brings us to the well-known Scripture in Romans 8:7. Paul wrote:

Because **the carnal mind *is* enmity against God**: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. (Romans 8:7)

You know this verse very well. But do you know **why** the natural human mind is resentful towards the laws of God? Why is that the case?

Going back to the ten commandments, the first nine commandments tell us what to do and what not to do. And then the very last commandment in that list actually confronts the natural human mind's hostility towards the laws of God. The tenth commandment focuses on how we are to think and how we are not to think; it focuses on how we are to use our minds.

Our minds are spontaneously hostile towards God's laws **because** our minds have the automatic tendency to go after "mammon". Our minds have an automatic desire to have more, to also have all the things that other people have; and that is in reality Satan's original attitude towards God; Satan wanted the power and status that belongs to God.

It is an attitude of covetousness that lies at the foundation of the human mind's spontaneous **hostility and hatred towards God's whole way of life**. That's the point in Romans 8:7. This human attitude is a direct parallel to covetousness lying at the foundation of Satan's hostility towards God's way of life. So the total and unconditional eradication of all covetousness will go a long, long, long way towards eliminating the human mind's spontaneous hostility towards the laws of God. And the people who don't ever repent during the millennium have minds that are locked into covetousness.

Can you grasp this?

Matthew 6:24 ("no man can serve two masters ...") provides the correct explanation for Romans 8:7. And it all goes back to a way of thinking that is addressed by the tenth commandment.

This either/or choice is also highlighted in one of Solomon's proverbs.

The prince (i.e. any ruler) that lacks understanding *is* also a great oppressor: *but* **he that hates covetousness** shall prolong *his* days. (Proverbs 28:16)

It is not just a matter of avoiding covetousness ourselves. We really need to go one step further and actively "hate" covetousness! That is Christ's message in Matthew 6:24. And this is particularly important for people in leadership positions. **Covetous leaders are always "great oppressors"**, just like Satan.

One other point we should notice here. In Luke's account of what we have in Matthew 6:24, Luke added another detail. Let's look at the context in Luke's account.

No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. And **the Pharisees** also, **who**

were covetous, heard all these things: and they **derided Him**. And he said unto them, You are they which **justify yourselves before men**; but God knows your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God. (Luke 16:13-15)

The Pharisees were motivated by covetousness; they were greedy for gain. Note that the Pharisees "derided" Jesus Christ. Why did they react that way? The Pharisees understood that Christ's statement "you cannot serve God and mammon" obviously implied that **covetous people cannot possibly serve God**! And since the Pharisees were indeed covetous, therefore they could not possibly be serving God. Covetous people in fact "despise" the laws of God. The whole religious conduct of the Pharisees was just so much hypocrisy.

Now notice one more important statement from Jesus Christ. Covetous people commonly make a great outward show of "**justifying themselves**" to everyone around them, i.e. "**before men**". That is one of the main motivations that applies to many of the super-wealthy who set up "charitable trust funds". Those "charitable activities" are to justify their covetousness.

That's what Jesus Christ was saying in verse 15. And it usually works for these very wealthy people! **Some of the greediest and most covetous people to ever have lived have managed to create for themselves images of being generous philanthropists.** The covetousness came first and the philanthropy only came later, frequently in clever ways that didn't even diminish their own personal wealth. Obviously, this does not apply to all the wealthy people who set up charitable funds. But then, not all wealthy people are covetous, and that is not something I mean to imply.

Let's move on.

THE TEST COMMANDMENT

We have sometimes said that the fourth commandment (i.e. the Sabbath commandment) is a test commandment. And in some ways it is. However, it is not really "**the**" test commandment! Many unconverted people throughout history have made an attempt to keep the Sabbath, and not all Sabbath-keeping religions are of God. And one cannot tell a true Christian from a non-Christian simply by looking at the matter of Sabbath observance.

The real test commandment is the tenth commandment! The real test commandment involves determining how we will choose to use our minds. If we allow our minds to desire things that belong to someone else (i.e. if we covet), then how we observe the other nine commandments has no influence whatsoever on our relationship with God. Faithful observance of the first nine commandments, including keeping the Sabbath, cannot undo the damage that is done to our minds (and consequently the damage done to our relationship with God) by coveting what belongs to someone else.

That's the real point of Christ's statement that no man can serve two masters.

Unless we root covetousness out of our thinking, our minds cannot possibly be changed. Rooting covetousness out of our minds involves changing the way we think. And that change in our thinking opens the way to remove the natural human mind's hostility and hatred towards God's laws, which in turn opens the way for us to receive God's spirit into our minds, to guide and direct our thinking in ways that will be pleasing to God.

This process requires our active participation. As we read in Psalm 119:36,

Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and **not to covetousness** (Hebrew = "betsa"). (Psalm 119:36)

God will only "incline our hearts" towards all of His laws if we ourselves make the active effort to examine all of God's laws, i.e. if we make the effort to study them. But if we don't actively expose our minds to God's laws, by getting our noses into the Bible, then there is no way that God is somehow going to sway our minds to seek a better understanding for how to apply God's laws in our lives today.

God opening our minds to a better understanding is always a careful balancing act, where the amount of effort we put out influences the other side of the scale. More effort on our part leads to more understanding being made available to us by God. And conversely, **less effort on our part is a tried and tested formula for a shallow and incomplete understanding of God's ways.** It has been tested thousands of times, and sadly, it works every time.

So if we want our understanding to remain shallow and incomplete, devoting less time to actually studying the Bible ourselves is the way to go. But surely that is not really what any of us want, is it? And many people who think they are doing Bible study are in fact doing nothing more than **some shallow Bible reading**. That type of superficial Bible reading does not lead to a better understanding, as witnessed by scores of millions of people in this world's religions, who have made a ritual out of "Bible reading"; they never really come to a better understanding of the Bible, no matter how often they read it.

Also, the "you are a minister, so just give me all the answers" approach doesn't work all that well. It works much better when we ourselves are seriously involved in digging out all the answers, by doing some serious Bible study ourselves. It is only when we get stuck in that process, that then we should ask the minister for some answers. **Easily obtained answers never lead to great understanding.**

Collectively, our understanding today is quite shallow because **we mostly don't do any serious studying of the Bible ourselves**. Mostly we expect someone else to do the serious studying of the Bible, and we just want them to give us all the correct answers. We want to leave real studying to "the experts"; but **that is not a good approach**. That is the opposite to the clear instruction "study to show yourself approved unto God" (2 Timothy 2:15). It is when we do some serious studying of the Bible ourselves, that then our hearts will be "inclined **away from** covetousness".

It is faithful adherence to the tenth commandment that sets true Christians apart from the rest of the world, rather than simply looking to the matter of Sabbath observance.

There is a major difference in the way the minds of people who consciously reject coveting work, when compared to the way the minds of all other people work. The tenth commandment is assuredly a test commandment for the human mind. Put in plain language: if we desire to have the things that belong to someone else (i.e. if we covet), then God cannot trust us, because our minds will still be motivated by the same desire that motivates Satan, namely, to have things that belong to someone else.

PAUL'S ADMONITIONS REGARDING COVETOUSNESS

Notice what Paul explained in Romans 7.

What shall we say then? *Is* the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for **I had not known lust, except the law had said, You shall not covet**. (Romans 7:7)

As I have already mentioned, the tenth commandment is about mind control. Lusting and coveting take place in the mind long before they ever manifest outwardly in word and/or deed. Without the tenth

commandment it would be difficult to identify any sins (i.e. any falling short of what God really desires from us) that don't manifest in outward wrong conduct or actions. In this verse Paul is saying that without the tenth commandment he would, for example, not really have comprehended that "whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her **already** in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

Paul is saying that **the tenth commandment also reveals God's real intentions for the previous nine commandments**. Paul is pointing out that the "you shall not covet" commandment shows that all the other commandments also apply to how we use our minds, how we think and what we think, in addition to obviously applying to our outward actions.

The tenth commandment is a vital key to understanding God's intentions with all of the ten commandments.

Here is an instruction Paul wrote to the Ephesians.

But fornication, and all uncleanness, or **covetousness**, let it **not be once named among you**, as becomes saints; (Ephesians 5:3)

The Greek word for "covetousness" in this verse is "pleonexia", which literally means "an eager desire to have more". The endless desire to have more is what motivates this world that is ruled by Satan. And we can very easily be caught up in this whole way of living, that we must constantly strive to have more, urged on by "the two daughters of the horseleach".

Paul is telling us to be on our guard against this attitude. In Colossians Paul made the following statement:

Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and **covetousness, which is idolatry**: (Colossians 3:5)

Covetousness is a way of thinking that directly opposes God. It is that God-opposing way of thinking that identifies covetousness as idolatry. It follows that a world steeped in covetousness is a world steeped in idolatry. In other words, idolatry does not require the presence of some physical idol, like a statue or a ring or a painting or an icon, etc. **Idolatry is something that happens in the mind**, in how the mind thinks and what it thinks.

Earlier I said that "covetousness is an expression of our attitude towards God". It is obviously a **wrong** attitude towards God. But any and every wrong attitude towards God is effectively idolatry. So yes, covetousness is most assuredly a form of idolatry. Let's continue with Paul's writings.

For neither at any time used we flattering words, as you know, **nor a cloak of covetousness**; God *is* witness: (1 Thessalonians 2:5)

At no point in his ministry was Paul ever motivated by covetousness. He didn't preach to get any personal advantages or benefits for himself. He wasn't out to make money.

However, it is very common for **worldly preachers** to disguise their own covetousness with religious appeals, always wanting more money to supposedly spread the gospel, or whatever specific message they espouse. Virtually all the religious programs on TV are prime examples of such "cloaks of covetousness", where the primary goal is always for these programs to rake in a lot of money. It is common for people to try to disguise their covetousness as something that is supposedly noble and virtuous.

Paul also pointed out that covetousness disqualifies a man from becoming a minister.

Not given to wine, no striker, **not greedy of filthy lucre**; but patient, not a brawler, **not covetous**; (1 Timothy 3:3)

The Greek text here translated "not greedy of filthy lucre" is a somewhat stronger and more graphic expression for "**not being covetous**", while the Greek word translated as "not covetous" (i.e. "aphilarguros") literally means "**without a love for money**". Anyone who is motivated by the desire to make a lot of money should not be ordained as a minister.

The point here is that Paul decided to state, not just once, but in two distinct expressions within this one verse that covetousness disqualifies a man from becoming a minister. And that should be obvious, since we have seen that covetousness is a form of idolatry. Anyone involved in idolatry is obviously not qualified to be a minister. **Every covetous man is guilty of idolatry!**

SOME MORE SCRIPTURES

Consider these verses from Solomon.

The desire of the slothful kills him; for his hands refuse to labor. He covets greedily all the day long: but the righteous gives and spares not. (Proverbs 21:25-26)

These verses speak about a certain type of person, someone who is **inherently lazy**, someone who does as little as possible just to get by, someone who is not prepared to work hard in order to accomplish something worthwhile. Solomon says that such people are frequently also extremely covetous. They want the things they see other people possess, but they are simply not prepared to actually work hard to then acquire the things that they desire to have. They want hand-outs from other people.

Solomon's point is that laziness and covetousness often go together like a hand and a glove. This is the one extreme of the spectrum for covetousness. At the other extreme covetous people never stop working in order to become richer and richer. Their covetousness drives them to make more money.

Consider also the advice that Jethro gave to Moses regarding selecting men for leadership positions.

Moreover you shall provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, **hating covetousness**; and place *such* over them, *to be* rulers of thousands, *and* rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens: (Exodus 18:21)

Very few, if any, of the leaders in our world today actually "hate covetousness". Most of them in fact embrace covetousness, and use their political offices to become wealthy. This applies to all, from the least of them to the greatest. The attitude of covetousness precludes any possibility for any of them to be "good leaders". The only ones who could possibly be "good leaders" are those who hate covetousness with a purple passion. In our world today if a poor man can gain a political office of significance, then he is likely to be a rich man by the time he dies. It is no wonder we have lousy leaders, when **covetousness is their most notable attribute**.

When a man sets himself the goal to become rich, then that is always a trap that Satan has set. As Paul explained:

But **they that will be rich** fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and hurtful lusts, which

drown men in destruction and perdition. (1 Timothy 6:9)

To be clear: By itself being rich is not a problem. A number of God's servants were very rich men, people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, etc. The problem is not the wealth itself. The problem is **a person's attitude towards wealth**. Setting ourselves the goal of becoming rich, and being willing to do whatever it takes to achieve that goal and to become rich, is the real problem.

As Paul said in the next verse:

For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. (1 Timothy 6:10)

In my article "God Hates All Forms Of Pride", I examined this verse at great length. I don't want to repeat all that information. But we should note that the actual word order of the Greek text here reads (English translation) "the root for all evil is the love for **money**, which while **some coveted after** ...". Without getting sidetracked by any technicalities, we should note that the desire to make a lot of money always causes us problems.

A very common problem is that the love for money will drive us out of God's Church (i.e. "err from the faith"). This has happened **thousands of times** during the past 2000 years, starting with Judas and a little later with Ananias and his wife Sapphira (Acts 5), right into our age today. Money can very easily lead us away from God.

That is why Paul admonishes us to never allow covetousness to become the motivation for what we do.

Let your conversation (i.e. your conduct) *be* **without covetousness**; *and* ***be*** *content* with such things as you have: for he has said, I will never leave you, nor forsake you. (Hebrews 13:5)

Covetousness is such a prevalent attribute for human beings, that we need to be admonished and warned repeatedly against becoming covetous. The antidote to covetousness is contentment.

Covetousness comes to us naturally, from very early childhood. We covet things we see long before we are able to express that covetousness in words. Contentment, on the other hand, is foreign to the natural mind. Covetousness is competitive, whereas contentment is not competitive. But contentment has to be learned, as we have already seen in Philippians 4:11. It takes a conscious setting of the mind for us to learn to be content.

Being content is a response we consciously choose towards whatever circumstances may confront us. Being content means that we choose to resist becoming competitive when we are exposed to less than ideal circumstances in our lives. This is a response we have to learn for dealing with whatever desires may enter our minds.

Here is what Peter said about carnal people in the world:

Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: **an heart they have exercised with covetous practices**; cursed children: (2 Peter 2:14)

This verse makes an extremely important point, and that is this: for many people in the world **covetousness becomes the motivation for everything they do**. It becomes the guiding principle in their lives. They have "exercised" or **conditioned their minds** to the point where their personal wants and desires are always the primary consideration for everything they do.

Consider what James wrote.

Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, **The spirit that dwells in us lusts to envy**? (James 4:5)

That is talking about coveting. **Envy is a manifestation of coveting.** James is not actually quoting any Old Testament Scripture here. It seems that James was trying to present a contrast here, as indicated by the next verse starting with the word "but". I suspect that "the Scripture" James had in mind refers to the statements James then presents in verse 6.

Anyway, in verse 5 James has pointed out that coveting is something we do spontaneously, because our minds have been programmed that way since early childhood by "the prince of the power of the air". That is the spirit that dwells in us. It takes no effort at all for us to covet. What takes effort is for us to not covet the things that belong to other people. What takes effort is for us to exercise a firm control over our minds.

As Paul explained:

Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and **bringing into captivity every thought** to the obedience of Christ; (2 Corinthians 10:5)

A PARABLE

Consider the following situation during Christ's ministry.

And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, **that he divide the inheritance with me**. (Luke 12:13)

Suppose you have an older brother. When your parents die they leave a home or a farm to you and your brother, which is worth perhaps half a million dollars. But your brother manages to take possession of the whole inheritance and he kicks you out empty-handed. You have been following Jesus Christ for some time (i.e. you are "one of the company") and so you approach Jesus Christ to help you get your fair share of the inheritance.

That's the situation.

Now you and I would surely not accuse someone of being covetous, simply because that person tried to get his fair share of the inheritance his parents left behind, would we? So the man's request doesn't seem to be unreasonable, does it? If you brought such a situation to me, and I then said "you need to watch out that you don't end up coveting that inheritance", how would you react? Would you be upset with me? If so, relax, because I wouldn't say that.

Let's notice how Jesus Christ responded to this request for help.

And he said unto him, Man, **who made me a judge or a divider over you**? (Luke 12:14)

Jesus Christ didn't say who was right and who was wrong in this inheritance issue. Christ simply didn't get involved. However, Christ implied that judges are the ones who should decide such cases. It is their job to decide such contentions between people.

But then Jesus Christ used this reasonable question from "one of the company" to speak about

covetousness. So Jesus Christ used this valid desire to obtain one's legal share of an inheritance to show that almost any situation in life can lead to coveting.

Coveting is an attitude, a wrong frame of mind; and **we can have that wrong frame of mind even towards those things that already belong to us**. That's the message of the parable that Jesus Christ then presented.

So notice:

And he said unto them, Take heed, and **beware of covetousness**: for a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesses. (Luke 12:15)

The man in this account had a valid claim to a portion of the inheritance. That is not disputed. He had a claim to a certain amount of wealth. So here is the lesson which Jesus Christ then presented with this parable.

When we have a legitimate claim to a certain amount of wealth, or when we are already legitimately wealthy, **we need to be very, very careful** that the wealth (or the potential wealth) does not cause us to change our priorities in life, **that we don't put the preservation of that wealth ahead of God in our lives**.

We need to be careful that our wealth doesn't become our defense. We need to guard against the attitude of Proverbs 18:11.

The rich man's wealth *is* his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit. (Proverbs 18:11)

The rich man in this proverb has a coveting attitude towards his own wealth. His wealth is so very important to him. He relies on his wealth for all his future needs. And he doesn't need God, and so God is not in the picture for that rich man. In fact, God is not in the picture for the great majority of rich people.

Let's now see the parable.

And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man **brought forth plentifully**: (Luke 12:16)

Here we have a rich man very legitimately becoming even more rich. That's the setting. The focus is now on the attitude of rich people striving for even greater riches.

And he thought within himself, saying, **What shall I do**, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? (Luke 12:17)

When people who are already well off obtain additional wealth, then that situation is always a test from God, to see how the minds of these rich people work. The question is: what do we do with that additional wealth? Do we use it selfishly, or do we use it in ways that will also benefit other people?

Jesus Christ understood human nature better than anyone else. And so Christ then presents a way of reasoning that very likely applies to a considerable majority of wealthy people.

And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and **there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods**. (Luke 12:18)

The rich man's attitude was: all I care about is me! And this additional wealth will secure my financial

well-being for the rest of my life.

And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have much goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, *and* be merry. (Luke 12:19)

The man's plans are so utterly and totally selfish. All he can think about is himself and his great wealth. He is putting his trust and his reliance in his own wealth. God is not in the picture for this rich man. The man's attitude is one of covetousness, exactly the same as rich people who will freely tell you that they "love money".

But God said unto him, ***You*** **fool**, this night your soul shall be required of you: then whose shall those things be, which you have provided? (Luke 12:20)

It is not the man's wealth that makes him a fool. It is **his coveting attitude** towards wealth that makes him a fool. His wealth is in effect his god. And that is what we have already seen in Colossians 3:5, that covetousness is a form of idolatry.

So *is* **he that lays up treasure for himself**, and is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:21)

This is the conclusion of a parable that was started by Jesus Christ with the admonition "beware of covetousness". The implication of Jesus Christ's statements here is that setting ourselves the goal to become wealthy, popularly known as "**seeking the American dream**", can very easily lead us into covetousness. That isn't necessarily always the case, but it is the case very easily and very commonly!

RICH SERVANTS OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We need to recognize that **if we strive to become rich**, we are in danger of getting drawn into idolatry. And that has nothing at all to do with the fact that some of God's servants during Old Testament times were extremely rich, because in Old Testament times people lived under a different dispensation, a time when God tried to work with the genetic descendants of one family, the people of Israel. That approach didn't actually work as God had hoped, and that is why God then "divorced" Israel.

Since Christ's ministry God has abandoned that approach, and instead is now working with those people **from all nations** that God is specifically calling during this age. This new approach allows God to **vet people** to a certain degree **before calling them**, rather than depending exclusively on what type of character the descendants of three righteous patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) might "bring to the table".

And with this new approach, started at the time of Christ's ministry, giving people vast amounts of wealth has not really been a part of God's plan. Recall that as this approach was starting to be implemented, Jesus Christ Himself said "**a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven**" (Matthew 19:23).

That statement all by itself should tell us that **from Christ's ministry onwards God was not really going to give the people God would call great riches**. It follows that when people during their own lives accumulate great riches **due to their own efforts**, then there is always a great risk that they are motivated by a desire to become rich, and in that case 1 Timothy 6:9 once again enters the picture.

My point here is this:

When those people who today seek to become rich appeal to Old Testament examples of men who were extremely wealthy, then they are ignoring the facts.

The facts are that **with the start of the New Testament God abandoned the approach of giving great riches to some of the people God would call**. And so Paul pointed out that in this age God has not chosen many "wise ... mighty ... or noble" (see 1 Corinthians 1:26). Wealthy people are a part of "the mighty", because wealth confers a certain amount of power on people. And God hasn't chosen the billionaires and the multi-millionaires of the world.

Now if someone becomes very wealthy through no efforts of his or her own, then that is different. This might be the case when people inherit great wealth (inheritance is the reason why this parable was told in the first place), or when great wealth is for some reason gifted to them, or great wealth comes to them without undue personal efforts (e.g. oil or gold or some mineral, etc. is discovered on land they happen to own, their land produces bumper crops, etc.). In such cases the issue would not be one of "they that want to become rich" (see 1 Timothy 6:9 again). The key is that in such cases the individuals involved didn't devote their lives to trying to become rich. **The riches came to them largely without their own efforts.**

It is okay to be wealthy and even very wealthy. It is just that we need to make sure that the acquisition of great wealth never becomes the motivation that drives us to seek to become richer and richer. Ultimately **it always boils down to a question of faith in God**.

As Jesus Christ said:

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, *shall he* not much more *clothe* you, **O you of little faith**? (Matthew 6:30)

Jesus Christ was addressing these statements and those that follow very specifically to people who make becoming wealthy their goal.

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (Matthew 6:31)

These are exactly the things we typically do worry about ... how to pay for all of life's necessities. In fact, these things occupy the bulk of our waking hours, day in, day out. For people who strive to become rich such worries and concerns only become greater.

Jesus Christ continued by focusing on the best antidote to covetousness.

But **seek** you **first the kingdom of God**, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matthew 6:33)

If we make our personal relationship with God our undisputed top priority, then God will also help us with all our daily needs. As Jesus Christ then said:

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day *is* the evil thereof. (Matthew 6:34)

Even if we don't always see it, **the days are indeed filled with evil**. And one of the major evils all around us is covetousness, the desire to have the things that belong to other people. Covetousness is a way of thinking that comes very naturally to us. To root covetousness out of our lives we need to make a conscious and concerted effort to learn to be content in various different circumstances, following Paul's

example.

Let’s beware of covetousness.

Frank W Nelte