

# X: Not Coveting

Turn with me to **Deuteronomy 5**. In 1984, **the movie *Amadeus*** was released in theaters across the world. It is considered by some to be one of the best films of all time. The movie tells the story of two musical composers: Antonio Salieri and another guy you may have heard of named Mozart. As the story goes, *Salieri* loved Mozart's music, and wanted to be a renowned composer in the same vein. So much so that he makes a vow with God that he will live a devout religious life if God will make him the greatest composer of all time. He understands God to have agreed with the arrangement. Don't ask me to tell you how you discern something like that—but somehow, to him, it worked.

But time goes on and **Salieri still feels plagued by his own *mediocrity*** as a composer. It gets worse when one day, **he meets his *hero***, Mozart, in person. And to say the least, Mozart is very unimpressive as a person. He's a bit of a drunk, *very* immature, and seems to have no interest in piety or devotion to God whatsoever. And *yet*, his music is far better than Salieri's. *Everybody* knows Mozart's music; hardly *anyone* knows Salieri's. This begins to burn at Salieri from the inside out. He does not understand how someone so foolish, so immature, so *juvenile*—seems so favored by God, while he himself is mostly overlooked and forgotten, *despite* his devotion.

He eventually becomes so bothered by this perceived injustice, that he **formulates a plan**. He is going to deceive Mozart into composing a new piece, Salieri will *murder* Mozart before he finishes it, steal the composition, and release it as his own creation. *Then*, he thinks, he will finally have the glory and recognition he's always wanted as one of the world's great composers. The plan ultimately fails, Salieri never achieves notoriety, and goes to his grave thinking of himself as the "patron saint of mediocrity."

**Quite the story**, yeah? Bet you didn't know there was that much drama playing out behind the scenes of ancient classical music. **They could make it into a reality show**. Now, we're pretty sure that *some* of the movie, as with many historical movies, was embellished for effect. **Which is another way that it is just like modern-day reality TV**. But the *movie* did really well—it was a box office hit. It was nominated for 53 awards and won 40, including the Academy Award for Best Picture. **It was also parodied in an episode of *Family Guy*—which is obviously one of the *best* measures of the success of a film**.

But one could argue that **the reason it connected so widely** with audiences is because it centers on one of the most universally understood and shared human experiences: that of *envy*. The story is about *one* man who was *envious* of another. One person who thought of themselves as ordinary, thought of someone else as *extraordinary*, and

therefore spent their entire life trying to *be* or *become like* the other person. And that is truly a story as old as time.

Earlier in this series, we briefly referenced the story of **Cain and Abel** from Genesis 4. *That* story plays out as a real-life version of the *fictional* depiction of Salieri and Mozart. It's about two brothers who each bring sacrifices to God. God receives Abel's offering, but not Cain's. Cain is so jealous, so *envious* of his brother, that he ends up *killing* him. What's even more significant about the story is that it is the *first* story we read about after sin enters the human predicament. **One of the first things that happens after sin happens is envy.** *Jealousy* of other people who we consider to be better than us, more well-off than us, more *favored* than us.

**Anyone who is very self-aware** likely knows that they are sometimes driven by envy. Here's the way **Ecclesiastes** actually puts it:

*And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.<sup>1</sup>*

"All toil (people's desire to work hard), and achievement spring from *envy*"—the desire to be like or become like someone else. Now, we've talked before about the **complexity of reading Ecclesiastes**. Large portions of the book read a bit like a cynic's take on the world. So take that into account as you read lines like this. But still, I think I see where he's coming from.

If I'm honest, **in my own life**, I am *often* motivated by the desire to be like, or become like someone else. Or to have what someone else *has*. I remember, about six years ago, Ana and I buying our first house. We were so proud. It was way more house than we thought we'd be able to afford. It was a four bed, three bath. Two stories. Private back patio that was awesome. I remember being *amazed* that it had a full bathroom inside the primary bedroom, and just thinking that that was the coolest, most grown-up thing ever. I felt like I had *arrived* as an adult human being. Everything about the house was great. Felt like I was on top of the world.

**Until**, one day, I went and saw a house that a friend of mine had just bought. And all of a sudden I didn't like *my* house very much. Theirs was a four bedroom too, but it had three *and a half* bathrooms. Sooo much better. It was two stories too, but it had a *yard*—our house didn't really have much of a yard. *They* had a bathroom inside the primary bedroom *too*—but their bathroom was waaaaaay bigger than ours. So much room for

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:4

pooping and showering. You wouldn't believe it. / And *after* visiting their slightly *better* house, it's amazing how quickly I went from really loving our house to thinking our house was kind of underwhelming. Took a split second to change my entire outlook on what I had.

All of a sudden, I felt like I **needed to work harder**. I needed to ask for a raise. Not necessarily because it's *good* to work hard, or because I *needed* more money—none of that. **It was because I saw something someone else had, that I wanted.** That's what the author of Ecclesiastes is saying: *all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another*. This is the power that *envy* can exert over us as human beings.

**If you ask the average person** in this room *why* we are driven to achieve more and more in our life: I would bet that it's because there's at least a picture in our heads of the type of *person* we want to be. **But here's the thing:** I bet if we thought about it very *critically*, that picture in our heads is at least *loosely* based on someone else. One of our friends or family members who has what we consider to be a pretty *ideal* life. Or some public figure that has a lot of "success," however we choose to define that word.

My point is that *envy* is a pretty **universal human experience**. ~~And chances are, envy motivates and fuels far more of our actions and decisions than we fully realize it does. I would bet that a lot of our lives are actually driven by us wanting what someone else has: whether that's their house, their possessions, their income, their job, their friendships, their marriage, their singleness, their family situation...or most anything else, really. How much of our energy and effort is spent *wanting* what someone else *has*? I'd be willing to bet that it's more than we realize.~~

Okay. So **it's into that universal human experience** that the tenth and final commandment reads as follows. Look with me in **Deuteronomy 5, v. 21**:

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

Last week we mentioned that **the word "neighbor"** in the Old Testament can refer to pretty much anyone you come into contact with. It's basically the same as saying the word "someone" in English. So here in the tenth and final commandment, we're told that we are not to *covet* anything that *belongs* to our neighbor: anything that *belongs* to someone else. *Coveting* when you want someone *else's life* (or some component of it), as *your own* life. It's when you see something someone else has and you think to yourself,

“I must have *that* in order to be happy.” To be *complete*. To be *satisfied* with my life. It’s when we believe that fullness of joy is found in obtaining something someone else *has*.

Then, the passage actually **gives us some examples** of things ancient Israelites might have been *inclined* to “covet.” Their neighbor’s *wife* (or, we could infer, *husband*). We could probably add to that, coveting the type of relationship *our* neighbor *has* with their husband or wife. Or simply coveting that they *are* married, seeing as how *we’re* not. We also aren’t to covet our neighbor’s *house* or *land*. **So thinking things like, “I just wish we had a house *that* size. I wish we had a house in *that* neighborhood, in *that* part of town, in *that* school district. I wish our backyard looked like *that*. I wish I had *that* creativity to renovate *our* house like *they* renovated *theirs*.”**

It then mentions coveting your neighbor’s **“male or female servant.”** And obviously, to modern ears, it sounds to us like there’s a much *bigger* problem with that dynamic than just *coveting*. And we’ve done some work before on Sundays, talking about ancient forms of slavery and how they differed from the kind you and I tend to think of. I’ll link to those teachings in the readable PDF of this sermon that we post later today if you want to study further.<sup>2</sup> But the point being made is simply that we shouldn’t covet *any aspect* of another person’s life. **Anytime you and I look at another person’s situation and go “my life would be *better* if I had what *they* have,” the Scriptures would call *that* “**coveting.**”**

Now, some of us might be wondering, **why is *that* such a big deal?** I mean certainly jealousy *can* be a bad thing—but is it really one of the ten most *important things in life* that we must *not do*? I think to many people, coveting could *appear* to be relatively *harmless* on the surface. Is it really that bad to *want* things that someone else has? Chances are, doing that isn’t hurting the other person—they might even be *flattered* by it. (And according to Ecclesiastes, apparently it’s the motivation behind most everything we do!) So is it really that *bad* to simply covet someone else’s life or possessions or situation?

That’s a **great question**; ~~I’m so glad you asked.~~ The answer is yes—it is bad, and here’s why. Let me give you what I would consider to be several **negative impacts of coveting** (or envy), so that maybe you can understand why God might warn his people *against* it in the Ten Commandments. You ready? The *first* problem is that...

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<sup>2</sup> See [here](#) or [here](#).

## Coveting Kills Contentment

**One of the fastest ways** to be really unhappy with your life is to continually compare it to someone else's life. Specifically, someone with *more* or *better* than what you have. Think of **my own story earlier** about owning a house. I was really *happy*, really *proud*, really *content* with the house we bought. ...Until the *moment* I saw a better house than mine. Then all of the sudden this house I liked a *lot* seemed kinda boring. Kinda average. Kinda basic. And meanwhile, *nothing had actually changed* about my situation! I just happened to notice somebody with a little bit more than I had. Coveting *kills* contentment.

Some of us are really *content* with our income level, our job, our spouse, our stage of life—you name it. We're really happy with it *all*...**as long as we stay off Instagram**. But as soon as we get on Instagram and start scrolling through *other* people's lives, all of a sudden, there are about 1400 things we absolutely must have and cannot be *content* without. I read this the other day: recent in-depth research taking place over 15 years has shown that social media has had a *significant impact* on our collective mental health. *Specifically*, due to how easy it makes it to compare ourselves to other people. According to the findings, quote:

*The study revealed that comparing yourself to other people on social media can be detrimental to your mental health, self-esteem, subjective well-being, and body image [...] The 'highlight reel' nature of social media means that the majority of content we are exposed to leaves us with the impression that others are doing better than us. Comparing our lives to those that we perceive as "better-off" is referred to as an upward comparison and is damaging to our psychological well-being and the way that we view ourselves.*<sup>3</sup>

The "highlight reel nature of social media." Okay, I need you to hear this. **Your life cannot possibly measure up to what other people post on social media...because even their lives don't measure up to what they post on social media.** It's their *highlight* reel! But when we spend hour after hour scrolling through other people's highlight reels, a narrative forms in our minds that their life is far better than ours and that our life cannot *possibly* be worthwhile or enjoyable. Coveting *kills* contentment. And hear me: *envy* is a game you can never win. **It's a hamster wheel you can't ever hop off of.** And here's why: **because someone will always have more than you.** Someone else will *always* have something you *want*. Someone will *always* be one step ahead, one life stage ahead, one tax bracket ahead of you. **And if you live your life by envy, you will be perpetually discontent.**

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<sup>3</sup> More info on the study [here](#).

So, follow me here: **what if, in an effort to keep us** from being perpetually discontent with what we have, God tells us *not* to continually covet other people's stuff? What if that's him looking out for our general quality of life? What a gracious, thoughtful, intentional command that would be from the God of the universe to us. Coveting *kills* contentment. Second...

## Coveting Kills Community

**The more envious we are** of what other people *have*, the less we are able to live in meaningful, deep *relationships* with those people over time. Let me try and show you what I mean. This is James 4—listen closely to what it says:

*What causes fights and quarrels among you* (as followers of Jesus)? *Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?* For instance: *You desire but do not have, so you kill. You* (what's that next word?) *covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.*<sup>4</sup>

So according to James, **sometimes, the reason that we experience** conflict with other followers of Jesus, is because we *covet* what they have. Maybe that sounds far-fetched to you, but think about some scenarios with me. **Single folks** in the room: *have you ever had another single friend of yours start dating someone, and all of a sudden find yourself very jealous, envious of them?* **Married folks**: *ever found yourself wishing your spouse would look, or act, or interact with you the way a friend's spouse interacts with them?* Those of you **with kids**: *ever found yourself envious of how well-behaved, well-performing your friends' kids are, compared to your own?* Folks nearing **retirement age**: *ever found yourself jealous of how much earlier your friends are retiring than you are, or how well-prepared they are for retirement, compared to you?*

Okay, and **then in any of those situations**: **have you ever found that jealousy, that envy, that covetousness, causing bitterness and resentment in you towards those friends of yours?** Ever found it generating conflict with them as a result? Ever find yourself nitpicking certain things they say or do around you and get frustrated—but the frustration actually isn't so much about those little nitpicky things...it's actually about the overall jealousy you have of their life and situation? Okay, that's exactly what James 4 is talking about: "why are there fights and quarrels among you? [...] You *covet*, but you cannot *get*, so you quarrel and fight." Coveting *kills* community. **You cannot build a meaningful relationship with someone you are actively harboring resentment towards.**

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<sup>4</sup> v. 1-2a

Here's **another way to think about it**. **Romans 12**, v. 15 tells us as followers of Jesus to "rejoice with those who rejoice." The vision for a community of God's people is that when something worthy of "rejoicing" happens to another person, we would be able to *rejoice* with them. **When someone gets a promotion at work that they've worked hard to get, we celebrate *with* them. When someone gets married, we celebrate *with* them. When someone buys a house, graduates, gets a job—we *celebrate with* them.** The goal is that whenever someone *celebrates* something within a community of faith, we get to celebrate *with* them.

But here's the thing: **coveting will not allow us** to do that. **Coveting causes us to see other people's joys and successes as a *threat* to our own joy and success. As *competition*.** As little more than a reminder of what *we don't* have, that *they do*. One author says that coveting actually *inverts* what Romans 12 says to do.<sup>5</sup> It means that when something *good* happens to someone else, we secretly *mourn* because it's not happening to us. And when something *bad* happens to someone else, we secretly *rejoice* because it means we're better off by comparison. And listen: **it's difficult to state just how detrimental that thinking is to us becoming the Jesus-centered family we feel called to be here at City Church.** Am I making sense? Coveting kills *community*. And then lastly...

## Coveting Contradicts Grace

**Covetousness says** "I always have *less* than I *deserve*." **Grace says** "I always have *more* than I *deserve*." Covetousness feeds us the lie that what God has given *us* is quite literally never enough. That we're always *lacking* something we need. We're always *missing* something that our lives would be better off if we *had*. And it *prevents* us from seeing the grace that God has set before us right now. The things he's blessed us with, given *us*, in *our* lives, right this second. Which means **if we want to stop coveting, we need an intentional reset on the grace we've received, and how it's far better than everything we don't yet have.**

Now, as always, an understanding of **grace starts with** an understanding of what we've been given in *Jesus*. Specifically, that through his life, death, and resurrection. Take a look at the opening lines of **2 Peter 1**:

***Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly***

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<sup>5</sup> Joe Rigney, *Envy and Rivalry in Christian Ministry*

*life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.<sup>6</sup>*  
*“Everything we need.”*

Notice **what Jesus himself says**, talking about “bread” (which, in context, is a metaphor for his own body). He says:

*~~Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”~~<sup>7</sup>*

**Okay—could we not describe *coveting*** as a continual, unending “hunger” and “thirst” for *more*? A continual *longing* that never quite gets satisfied? Okay, if so: Jesus just told us that whoever comes to him will “hunger” and “thirst” no more. The promise made, over and over again, in the Scriptures is that understanding the grace of God is what allows us to resist the mindset that we never have enough. It teaches that when we are inclined to believe we *don’t* have what we need: we should go to Jesus where we can be reminded that in him, we’ve been given *everything* we need...and more.

But I **also don’t think it stops** there with Jesus. God’s grace is *centered* on the person and work of Jesus, but it also goes *beyond* that. God’s grace is also a way of talking about his ongoing, tangible, provision for us in all arenas of life. I’ll give you **a little bible experiment** to do. Next time you sit down for time in the Scriptures, I want you to turn to the Psalms and count how many times the psalmists mention “giving thanks” to God. I’ll just set expectations: it’s a *lot*. It’s like one of the most frequently repeated phrases in the Psalms, possibly in the entire bible.

And you know **what’s even more fascinating?** **The biblical authors evidently don’t even think you have to be in a good mood to give thanks.** Like you don’t have to be having a good day at all in order for you to thank God for what you have. Some of the psalmists give thanks while people are literally hunting them down in order to kill them. People give thanks right after horrible tragedy strikes their family and those they love. Paul gives thanks when he feels like he has plenty *and* when he is in need. **“Giving thanks,” evidently, in the bible, is an all-season activity.** It’s something you can do regardless of what you have or don’t have. It’s something you can do regardless of how well or poorly your life is going.

In **1 Thessalonians**, it literally says it this way:

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Peter 1:2-3

<sup>7</sup> John 6:35



...give thanks in all circumstances (in how many circumstances? All of them); for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

So if you're one of the millions upon millions of people that have desperately wanted to know what God's will for your life is, I have good news for you: God's will for your life...is that you would "give thanks in all circumstances." That's it—we figured it out! You don't have to wonder about it any more! God's will is for you to give thanks. Okay I'm obviously being a bit cheeky. But here's my point: **gratitude—actual, conscious, gratitude—is one of the most valuable weapons at your disposal when it comes to fighting discontentment and covetousness in your life.** That's the case the bible makes over and over again. But honestly, you don't even have to trust the bible to believe that—just plain old psychology is showing us now that this is how it works.<sup>9</sup> **Choose, in every situation, every circumstance, to be thankful—and see if that doesn't melt away at least some of your envy and discontent over time. </>**

So here's what I'd recommend if you struggle with any type of envy, or covetousness, or even just discontentment. And this is a serious suggestion. At some point in the next few days—maybe this afternoon—just blocking out some time, and grabbing a pen, some paper or a journal...and writing a list of things that are evidence of God's grace in your life. I'm dead serious about this—some of you are going to roll your eyes at that, and that's fine—you can continue being discontent and dissatisfied with your life—but for the rest of us... Make a list of things that are evidence of God's grace in your life. If you're a follower of Jesus, start with the one we mentioned earlier: God's grace towards you through Jesus. His grace in sending his son to the cross and back from the grave to save you from any variety of things you were caught up in. That's pretty significant evidence of God's grace.

From there, just take a survey of your life. What do you have that you can be thankful for? Notice I didn't say what are you thankful for—because that's kind of the point of this whole exercise: most of us don't instinctively notice and express gratitude for these things—most of us take them for granted most of the time. So it's gonna take some intentional, undistracted time and thoughtfulness. But what do you have to be thankful for? How about your job? Maybe you hate your job—that's fine—but if you have a job, that's more than a lot of people can say. So there's probably aspects of it you can be thankful for. If you're in school, there's another one: that's an incredible opportunity. Even if you're racking up thousands of dollars of student debt—still, you can be thankful that those types of loans are available, and that in theory, one day, you'll be able to pay them back.

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:18

<sup>9</sup> Source [here](#).

How about a **roof** over your head? There's one I think at least most of us have. How about the ability most of us have to purchase and eat food when we need it? For a *lot* of us, how about the ability to **go out to eat** at most any of the *many fantastic* restaurants in Knoxville? Knoxville, I would argue, has a disproportionately *fantastic* food, beer, and coffee scene for the size city we are. A lot of us have the financial ability to go enjoy that pretty much anytime—that's God's common *grace* to us as Knoxvilleians. How about living in one of the **best regions of the country** to live—especially this time of year? East Tennessee in the fall is unbelievable. How about your **LifeGroup, your friends, your family** (okay maybe some of us are going to have to work on that last one, but still!) I would be willing to bet that if you put forth just a little bit of time and energy, you could find things in your life that are evidences of God's grace to you. Things to be thankful (and actively express gratitude to God) *for*. You with me on that?

**Those things do exist;** our minds just tend not to gravitate towards them when we are obsessing all the things we *don't* have. All the things we *wish* we had. All the things our friends and neighbors and co-workers have, that we've convinced ourselves we're miserable without. So I'm saying, motivated and empowered by the grace of God, let's choose to "give thanks in all circumstances" instead. Let's choose to call our attention, time and time and time again, even when we don't feel like it, to the things we *do* have. The things we *have* been given. Am I making sense?

Okay. So **gratitude is the first way** to resist the pull towards envying and coveting others. I'll give you one more, that we're going to talk a lot about over the next few weeks in our next series. You ready? **Generosity**. I realize nobody likes when the church brings this up, and that's fine—because here, I'm not even talking about giving money to our church or *any* church. That *matters*, but that's not even what I'm talking about this morning. I'm talking about regularly giving away your money and your possessions to *other people in need of it*. That's *generosity*.

Now, here's **why I say that generosity is vital** to fighting discontentment and envy in your heart. *Discontentment, envy, and coveting* feed off of one fundamental flawed belief, and it sounds like this: "I never have enough." That's the lie: "I never have enough." But *generosity* teaches us the exact *opposite* principle. *Generosity* chooses to operate on the principle: "I always have *more* than enough." Right? The only way to be generous with our money and possessions is by assuming that we either *already* have more than we need, or that we *will* have what we need even though we choose to be generous.

**Generosity teaches us at a physical, tangible level** that we *do* have more than we need. **Everytime we send money to that friend who is having a hard time, we are training**

our hearts to believe that we have more than we need. Every time you look through your closet and give away stuff you don't need, you are training your heart to believe that God has provided you with more than enough. **Generosity forces your heart to operate on the principle that God has provided for you, and will *continue* to provide.** You're teaching your *brain* to remember that you're operating in *abundance*, not at a *deficit*.

Which means that **if you make generosity a pattern of your life**, you know what I'd bet happens? I'd bet your heart starts to *believe* that principle more and more tangibly. More and more *consistently*. If you want to be more and more *done* with *envy* and *coveting* in your life, *generosity* is a key part of how you'll get there. Now, a bit later during the announcements, I've actually got some really *specific* ways that we as a church are going to participate in generosity *together* this Christmas season—just in case you need some ideas to go on. So more on that here in a bit. But for now, I just want you to consider using that as a tangible method to push back on the mentality that says “I don't have enough.” Make sense?

Okay. So we're out of time, but here's **what we're going to do next**. As we do every week, we're going to all go to the tables—all of us who are followers of Jesus—and we're going to remember the greatest act of generosity the world has ever seen: the cross of Jesus. The moment where God did not even withhold his own son for our benefit. As we've already mentioned, that's where any of *our* generosity has to start. It's where any amount of being done with envy and coveting has to start. Every week, we go to the tables together and remember God's generosity to *us*—and then ask him by his Spirit to help us remember that he, and what we've been given is more than enough. “[He] is the bread of life...and anyone who comes to [him] will never go hungry.” Anyone who comes to him will never be thirsty. “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” So let's come to the tables and remember all of that together.

Pray with me...