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Contentment, Gratitude, Generosity

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It was a sunny, bright, carefree Friday afternoon. I was a Freshman at Pacific Lutheran University. I walked into an electronics store to buy the stereo system that would fulfill my musical dreams. There was no shortage of stereos in the dorm where I was living; everyone had one. My roommate even had one. There were big, beautiful, loud, bass-y stereos all around me. And it was awesome. But for some reason, undeterred by any shred of common sense or good judgment, I had talked myself into the idea that I needed a new stereo; a conversation with myself that took only 7 seconds. I had spent weeks researching, and I was ready. I was so excited! Musical happiness would be measured in decibels, watts per side, and a bass with a boost that I could feel in my sternum. Whether I listened to Beethoven's 5th Symphony, Chicago's "Saturday In the Park," or "25 Or 6 to 4," I knew it would be awesome. So, I walked in, put down some cold, hard cash, and drove home with my new stereo system. I was so stoked!

But that didn't last long. The next morning, I drove back to the electronics store and returned it. Buyer's remorse. Full transparency, you should know that I already had a pretty good stereo. But the more I looked at all the stereo systems around me, the less satisfied I was with my own. So, I said to myself, "Self, why not? Let's just do this." So, I did it. And I was oddly unhappy.

A wise person once said, "The secret to happiness is to want what you already have." This is not new news. It turns out a lot of wise people have offered some version of this. Four hundred fifty years before the birth of Jesus, the philosopher Socrates said, *"The secret of happiness is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less."* In the book of Timothy, the Apostle Paul writes this to this young pastor: *"A God-focused life does bring wealth, but it's the rich simplicity of being yourself before God. Since we entered the world penniless and will leave it penniless, if we have bread on the table and shoes on our feet, that's enough."* And Jesus was constantly teaching his followers about this.

In Luke 12:15 Jesus told his followers, *"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."* Jesus wanted His followers in every age and time to know that happiness, true contentment comes to us not by wanting our neighbor's stuff – coveting their car, boat, or lawn, or that nice riding lawn mower, their garden, their fancy mailbox, or water feature by their front door. Nope. Happiness doesn't come from adding more stuff to our lives to satisfy our gaping desires. Instead, it comes by subtracting from our desires. The secret to happiness is to want what you already have.

But humankind isn't wired that way. Unhappiness has a way of making us want a life that we don't have. We say to ourselves, "If this or that or those things happen, then we'll be content. We tell ourselves that the least complicated loves are the ones we don't have. We convince ourselves that our neighbor's grass actually grows greener while we're staring at it! In those moments, it's nearly impossible to hear that small voice of reason and wisdom telling us that we would be happier if our desires could remain on our own property. We would better love the life we have.

We are finishing our summer series called Top Ten. We've been exploring the Ten Words, the 10 Commandments. So far:

1st: No Other Gods [First, God, Only] All You'll Need

2nd: Honor God's Name [Call On Me] Here's My Name

3rd: Remember Sabbath [Day Of Rest] Breathe, Talk, Listen

4th: Honor Your Parents [Honor Our Origins]

5th: Murder [Mutual Life Insurance] Support, Respect, Life

6th: Adultery [Faithful, Loyal, Committed] Love Your Loves

7th: Stealing [Improve, Promote, Protect] Taking Isn't Getting

8th: Lying [Speak the Truth] Best Possible Light

Today we're looking at the 9th and 10th commandments which sound the warning bell about coveting... about wanting anything and everything that isn't yours.

In Exodus 20:17, we find these words: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or your neighbor's servants, your neighbor's ox or donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's ... including that Bang and Olufsen stereo system with a dedicated 140 watts a side satellite speakers and a subwoofer that you can hear down the hall, out the door, and around the block. In other words, keep your desires at home; want what you have, not what your neighbor has. The secret to happiness is to want what you already have. *The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.*

As we finish our journey with the Ten Words – the Ten Commandments, I want us to see a couple of things. First, I want us to see how specifically the 9th and 10th commandments are a call to be happy with what we have. And second, I want us to understand how all of these Ten Words are woven together and lead to deeper contentment, gratitude, and generosity.

Wanting what we already have leads to

Contentment. Contentment is found in knowing that God is all we need. God says [1st Commandment], there are no others; I'm all you need. **First, God, Only.** God has rescued us from oppression and given us new life. God then goes a powerful and gracious step further. God says to us, [2nd Commandment], **"Here's My Name."** Call me by my name, 'I Am Who I Am!' I am with you, and I am for you." And then God yet another step toward us and says, [3rd Commandment] "Let's come get together, let's meet regularly – let's call it Sabbath. It will be a **Day of Rest.** We'll share the bread of life, we'll drink from the cup of the covenant, the new promise that is for you and for all people, no exceptions. You will be renewed, restored, reconciled as the body of Christ and sent out in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news of the risen Christ. The rhythm of new life revealed in the first three commandments provide a picture of contentment in God.

Next, Contentment leads to Gratitude.

If contentment comes from acknowledging that God provides for our every need, then knowing that God does indeed provide for us naturally leads to gratitude. When we loosen our grip on our desire to be our own god by trying to provide for

own selves, we discover that we're loved and nurtured by a God who provides for us. That sets us loose to practice gratitude.

The author of the book of Hebrews writes, *"...be satisfied with what you have..."* This is ancient wisdom that reminds us that the answer to happiness is not achieving bigger and better, but simpler and more grateful. *"...be satisfied with what you have..."* But then the writer goes on with this: [Hebrews 13:5-6] *For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you." So, we can say with confidence, "The LORD is my helper, so I will have no fear.* Did you catch the shift?

Let me read the verse again. *"... be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)*

Did you see the shift? God changes our focus from what we have or don't have to who has us! And that is based on the promise of enduring relationship with our God: I will never leave you nor forsake you. God has us! There is deep contentment in that.

When the voice discontentment says, *"You should have what you don't have!"* God says, *I will never leave you, or forsake you."* When the voice discontentment says, *"You should have that car, that house.* God says, *"I will never leave you, or forsake you."* When the voice discontentment says, *"You would be happier with that lawn, with that Bang and Olufsen stereo system,* God says, *"I will never leave you, or forsake you."*

When contentment leads to gratitude, we're freed up to **Honor our Origins**, to acknowledge where we came from [4th commandment]. To **"Honor your Parents"** understands that nothing is perfect. Some of our origin stories are painful. Some of our origin stories are filled with joy. It's always a mix of challenge and blessing. It's all there. The commandment reminds us that it all belongs. Every bit of it has something to teach us. And so, we express gratitude for all of the lessons of life and more life that we have. We help others do the same by investing in **"Mutual Life Insurance"** [5th commandment]. And we embrace the challenge of being **faithful, loyal, and committed** to the integrity of our primary relationships [6th commandment] because when we do that, every

other relationship is impacted with joy and blessing. That's what gratitude does.

And finally, Gratitude leads to Generosity.

Someone once described generosity as the mindset of circulation. Like this: You take a book out of the library knowing that it's not yours. You're just going to read the book and then you're going to give it back to the library so that somebody else can read it. You've just borrowed the book. You don't own the book. The intent is not for you to take it and keep it, because **Taking Isn't Getting**. [7th commandment]. You borrow it, and you experience the goodness of it. When you check out the book you might even see the list of others before you who have borrowed the book, checked it out, enjoyed it, then returned it so that others can do the same. I think that's the way Christ Followers ought to think about everything we have, everything we own. God gave us what we need so that we could circulate it. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God blesses Abraham and says very clearly why He blesses Abraham. He says, "I've blessed you so that you can be a blessing."

Living with contentment opens the doors of gratitude, and when we walk through those doors of gratitude, we are empowered for life-altering generosity. We honor others when we **Speaking The Truth** [8th commandment]. Speaking truth in love honors the integrity of the entire human community. Improving, protecting and promoting the best in other people's lives is an act of generosity. Speaking the truth and putting the best possible construction on others – that is, shining the best possible light on someone else – especially when that person is a challenge to us, is an act of life-giving generosity. Generosity is what happens when we want what we already have.

When we live like that, there is no need for us to want what we don't have; [9th/10th commandment] to covet our neighbor's house, or spouse, or kids, or snow blower, or lawn mower, or garden, or boat, or car, or anything else that is our neighbor's, including the Bang and Olufsen stereo system with a dedicated 140 watts a side satellite speakers and a subwoofer that you can hear down the hall, out the door, and around the block. That's how generosity sets us up to live well together with God and with one another.

Ten Words... Ten Commandments that bring life and more life to the entire human family. This is how we live well together.

Questions to wrestle with:

Consider what gets in the way of **contentment**...

- What are the things that cause you to be restless?
- Think on this: God provides for your every need.

Consider what gets in the way of **gratitude**...

- Do you find yourself always wanting more?
- Like Ebenezer Scrooge... always squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, coveting?
- Think on this: God provides life and more life... is with you and for you

Consider what gets in the way of **generosity**...

- closed fists/open hands
- Think on this: God's generosity to us is a blessing to share with others.