Covetousness

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There are several words in Hebrew and Greek within the Bible (KJV) that are translated with various forms of the word, *covet*; and, in a few instances, with various forms of the word, *lust*.

They are:

1) Hebrew: *aw-vaw* ([Deuteronomy 5:21](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Deuteronomy+5.21&t=NKJV); [Proverbs 21:26](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Proverbs+21.26&t=NKJV)), *baw-tsah* ([Habakkuk 2:9](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Habakkuk+2.9&t=NKJV); [Psalm 10:3](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Psalm+10.3&t=NKJV)), *betsa* ([Exodus 18:21](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+18.21&t=NKJV); [Psalm 119:36](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Psalm+119.36&t=NKJV); [Proverb 28:16](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Proverb+28.16&t=NKJV); [Isaiah 57:17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Isaiah+57.17&t=NKJV); [Jeremiah 6:13](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Jeremiah+6.13&t=NKJV); [8:10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Jeremiah+8.10&t=NKJV); [22:17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Jeremiah+22.17&t=NKJV); [51:13](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Jeremiah+51.13&t=NKJV); [Ezekiel 33:31](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Ezekiel+33.31&t=NKJV); [Habakkuk 2:9](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Habakkuk+2.9&t=NKJV)) and *chamad* ([Exodus 20:17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+20.17&t=NKJV); [Joshua 7:21](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Joshua+7.21&t=NKJV)).

2) Greek: *laphilarguros* ([1 Timothy 3:3](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Timothy+3.3&t=NKJV); [Hebrews 13:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Hebrews+13.5&t=NKJV)), *epithumeo* ([Matthew 5:28](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Matthew+5.28&t=NKJV); [Acts 20:33](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Acts+20.33&t=NKJV); [Romans 7:7](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+7.7&t=NKJV); [1 Corinthians 10:6](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Corinthians+10.6&t=NKJV); [Galatians 5:17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Galatians+5.17&t=NKJV); [James 4:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=James+4.2&t=NKJV); [Revelation 18:14](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Revelation+18.14&t=NKJV)), *zeloo* or *zeleuo* ([1 Corinthians 12:31](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Corinthians+12.31&t=NKJV); [14:39](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Corinthians+14.39&t=NKJV)), *orego* ([1 Timothy 6:10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Timothy+6.10&t=NKJV)), *pleonektes* ([1 Corinthians 5:10-11](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Corinthians+5.10-11&t=NKJV); [6:10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Corinthians+6.10&t=NKJV); [Ephesians 5:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Ephesians+5.5&t=NKJV)), *pleonexia* ([Mark 7:22](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Mark+7.22&t=NKJV); [Luke 12:15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Luke+12.15&t=NKJV); [Romans 1:29](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+1.29&t=NKJV); [2 Corinthians 9:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Corinthians+9.5&t=NKJV); [Ephesians 5:3](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Ephesians+5.3&t=NKJV); [Colossians 3:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Colossians+3.5&t=NKJV); [1 Thessalonians 2:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Thessalonians+2.5&t=NKJV); [2 Peter 2:3](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Peter+2.3&t=NKJV), [14](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Peter+2.14&t=NKJV)) and *philarguros* ([Luke 16:14](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Luke+16.14&t=NKJV); [2 Timothy 3:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Timothy+3.2&t=NKJV)).

Although there are some minor shades of differences of meaning applicable to each word, the primary connotation applicable to all is that of *being given over* to (lusting after) *a carnal love of or greed for material or personal possessions*. To *lust* is to exhibit a craving based on one’s carnal (fleshly or one’s “sin nature”) desires.

Covetousness is initially introduced in the Bible as a hard and fast prohibition in [Exodus 20:17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+20.17&t=NKJV), which is *the tenth commandment* given to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is the only one of the *Commandments* that deals with the intent of the heart (the thinking and feeling part of man). In other words, it deals with a person’s *motive*. As seen above, it is a sin that is addressed in many different areas within God’s Word. One of the more defining verses of Scripture on the matter is [Romans 7:7](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+7.7&t=NKJV) where Paul, in speaking on the purpose of the Law, states: *What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known lust* [covetousness, in many versions] *unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."* In the Greek this verse appears to equate *covetousness* to *lust*. In truth both words convey an inordinately strong and carnal (impure) desire or appetite.

But before a Christian can make personal judgments on various practical applications as they pertain to covetousness, he should first understand (1) the purpose of the Mosaic Law, (2) the application of the Mosaic Law for the Christian, (3) the state of liberty provided by Christ for the Christian, (4) the eternal conflict between law (works) and grace and (5) the traits of covetousness as illustrated in God’s Word. These five considerations follow.

1) The Christian should understand the purpose of the Mosaic Law, that it was to reveal to man the fact that he is a sinner, not to establish some creed by which if followed a person would obtain favor with God (although this would be the result if it was indeed possible for man to perfectly, without exception, keep the Law).

*Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin*. ([Romans 3:20](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+3.20&t=NKJV))

*Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. .* . . ([Romans 5:20](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+5.20&t=NKJV))

*What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."* ([Romans 7:7](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+7.7&t=NKJV))

*What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions* . . ([Galatians 3:19](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Galatians+3.19&t=NKJV))

2) The Christian should understand that the Mosaic Law does have application to the Christian today, but not as he may think. A detailed study of the books of Romans and Galatians clearly explains that the Law has no application to the salvation of anyone. The Law was meant only to reveal to a person’s his sin and his need for salvation from outside himself. It is this realization of one’s sinfulness that brings a person to by faith alone in Christ alone receive God’s gracious gift of eternal life. Yet, the moral and some of the social and ceremonial tenets of the Law are still in force for the Christian today. It is by obedience to these a Christian demonstrates his love for and to God; although, the only possible manner in which a Christian may be obedient in a fashion that pleases God is by submitting (by faith) to the Holy Spirit within. Nevertheless a Christian is still to not take God’s name in vain, to honor his father and mother, to not murder, to not steal, to not bear false witness, to not covet and to abstain from certain ceremonial offerings to idols ([Acts 15:28-29](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Acts+15.28-29&t=NKJV)).

3) The Christian should realize that he is no longer under the Mosaic or ceremonial laws, but that he is now subject to the perfect Law of Liberty or “freedom in Christ” ([James 1:25](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=James+1.25&t=NKJV); [2:12](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=James+2.12&t=NKJV); [John 8:32](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=John+8.32&t=NKJV); [Romans 8:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+8.2&t=NKJV), [21](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+8.21&t=NKJV); [14:1-23](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+14.1-23&t=NKJV); [1 Corinthians 10:23](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Corinthians+10.23&t=NKJV); [2 Corinthians 3:17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Corinthians+3.17&t=NKJV)). This law, which frees the Christian from the bondage of the Mosaic and ceremonial laws, is best understood by the expressions, *in Christ* or *Christ in you*. It simply means that Jesus Christ through the indwelling Spirit of God resides within each Christian and may, if allowed by the person’s will and faith, empower the Christian to live a victorious life in obedience to God’s established moral and social codes. Even so, a Christian must never make the mistake in using his liberty or freedom in Christ to take advantage of situations that will offend or make someone stumble in their coming to or serving Jesus Christ ([1 Corinthians 8:9](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Corinthians+8.9&t=NKJV); [Galatians 5:13](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Galatians+5.13&t=NKJV); [1 Peter 2:16](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Peter+2.16&t=NKJV)).

4) The Christian should understand that the dueling concepts of works and grace have persisted since man spiritually fell in the Garden of Eden. Man’s efforts to obtain the favor of God through self-effort (his “good” works) have always been abhorrent to God. God’s way is always of grace, which is unmeritorious on man’s part. Man, by his own efforts, can do nothing to obtain the favor of God in salvation or sanctification. This is why “religion” is never of God; it has no semblance to Christianity. Religion is man’s endeavor to achieve the approbation (approval) of God through self-effort. Christianity is a union or relationship with a Person—Jesus Christ, and may only be received “by faith.”

But after a person becomes a Christian by faith alone to Christ alone, he often resorts back to several means of self-promotion with God. One way he does this is to make up a laundry list of taboos, a litany of “dos and don’ts” which are often based on his interpretation and application of God’s moral code to various items within his life. These are items he “must not do or must do,” “must not participate in or must participate in,” “must not attend or must attend,” “must not purchase or must purchase,” “must wear or must not wear,” and the list can go on almost endlessly. These taboos are often called “convictions,” and are worn with (false) pride by the Christian in order to demonstrate his “spirituality” before other Christians.

Unfortunately, since many of these are usually based in “pride” they always lead to an unloving spirit, to unfair judgments of others and to a spiritual fall—a journey away from true spirituality for a period of time. Maturity for the Christian is achieved as he comes to the understanding that Christianity is not a system of rules, but a vital and dynamic relationship with a Person—Jesus Christ, who alone can empower the Christian through the indwelt Holy Spirit to do what is right in the sight of God, no matter the circumstances.

5) The Christian should understand the Biblical traits or characteristics of covetousness. It involves more than just desiring or wanting something; otherwise, all quests or desires for one’s self-preservation, for one’s livelihood, for one’s family and their needs, or for anything good and true would be sin. The following is a list of traits of covetousness and their Scriptural basis.

1) Covetousness exists when it is executed against a material property or person that rightfully belongs to or is associated with another person ([Exodus 20:17](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Exodus+20.17&t=NKJV)) and/or against any material property or person for reasons of greed, avarice and self-aggrandizement—all impure and godless motives designed to feed one’s carnal appetite, *i.e.*, to lust after the object in and of itself with no reference or connection to God’s plan for one’s life ([Luke 12:15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Luke+12.15&t=NKJV); [16:14](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Luke+16.14&t=NKJV); [Romans 1:29](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Romans+1.29&t=NKJV); [1 Corinthians 10:6](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Corinthians+10.6&t=NKJV); [2 Corinthians 9:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Corinthians+9.5&t=NKJV); [Colossians 3:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Colossians+3.5&t=NKJV); [1 Timothy 6:10](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=1Timothy+6.10&t=NKJV); [2 Timothy 3:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Timothy+3.2&t=NKJV); [Hebrews 13:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Hebrews+13.5&t=NKJV); [James 4:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=James+4.2&t=NKJV); [2 Peter 2:3](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=2Peter+2.3&t=NKJV)).

2) Covetousness exists when material objects or personalities exceed the importance of God in one’s life, such twisted priority also being idolatry ([Mark 10:17-27](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Mark+10.17-27&t=NKJV); [Luke 12:22-34](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Luke+12.22-34&t=NKJV); [Colossians 3:5](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Colossians+3.5&t=NKJV)).

**Conclusion**

Covetousness is any form of impure desire for another person’s property or personal associations and/or the worship of any goods, possessions or persons that take the place of God in one’s life.

Covetousness is *not* the desire or need to make money, “get ahead,” or advance in order to take care of one’s responsibilities in life, as long as such advancement and needs are in honor and recognition of God and His plan for one’s life.

Covetousness may indeed be associated with forms of gambling, lotteries, investments (which do not qualify as material possessions belonging to someone else) and other activities of chance if the motives behind the participation in these activities are strictly selfish and centered on one’s love for money. This would particularly be true if such participation becomes habitual and leads a person to abandon his legal and ethical responsibilities to himself, to his family and to society, but especially to God.

On the other hand it is this writer’s interpretation that covetousness would not be present in occasional participations in promotional contests, the stock market, lotteries or other investments as long as the Christian does not neglect his God-given responsibilities and keeps his priority centered on Jesus Christ. The Christian must keep in mind that what makes one’s desires fall under the umbrella of “covetousness” is the *intent* of his heart. If the *intent* to engage or not engage in *any activity* is to promote one’s spirituality (a position rooted in pride) or to feed one’s carnal appetites, then covetousness and sin are the reality. Many activities, in and of themselves, are not wrong. It is the intent behind the participation in such that must be examined and understood.

As Allan R. Killen, Th.D., Professor of Contemporary Theology, Reformed of the Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi puts it, “It is essentially covetousness which causes one to want to keep up with others when he knows that doing so extends him beyond his means and causes him to purchase what he really does not need.” On the other hand, one must always guard against becoming strictly legalistic and super pious in his involvement with society. Nothing must ever take the place or minimize one’s relationship with Jesus Christ, and should this *not* be the case with someone buying a lottery ticket, scratching a number off a card in a promotional contest of chance, buying stock in the market or purchasing an extra car, then covetousness would not be a factor.