

Covetousness

Turn with me to the Book of Luke chapter 12, beginning in verse 13 and follow along as I read about this occasion where a large crowd had gathered to hear the Lord Jesus teach. And as He was speaking,

¹³ . . . one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

¹⁴But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

¹⁶Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. ¹⁷And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' ¹⁸So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" ²⁰But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'

²¹"So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."
(Luke 12:13-21)

In the Book of Exodus chapter 20, the Lord gave us ten basic "rules of law" that He said we really must follow and obey. And while our "natural" minds do have difficulty understanding many of the "Spiritual Truths" given in these scriptures, for the most part, we are able to read those words given there in the Ten Commandments and we can comprehend most of what they tell us.

And for me, that is true for the first nine commandments. But folks, I must confess to you that I struggle to fully comprehend the meaning of those last words, the tenth commandment, the one about covetousness, the sin that Jesus was warning the crowd about in the words of our scripture text that I just read.

Listen to those words about "covetousness" that God gave to us in Exodus chapter 20 in the Tenth Commandment. There we are told,

¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's." (Exodus 20:17)

On the surface, it would seem that these words are somewhat simple. But the more I've studied them, the more I've realized that their meaning is far more complex and far more wide-ranging than they at first seem to be.

Yes, these words do mean that I am not to "covet" or "desire" or "lust after" or even "want" any of those things that belong to my neighbor. And yes, the words of this commandment are very specific. I think especially about the words that prohibit a man from coveting his neighbor's wife. And that also applies to women not coveting their neighbor's husband. It's easy to see from the high divorce rate today that that manner of coveting is rampant within our culture.

But this commandment is clearly not limited to just our not lusting after and coveting my neighbor's wife or the things that he owns. Rather, within these words, Jesus seems to be giving us some more wide-ranging principles of life that need to be applied to all manner of our desires for the things of this world.

I'm reminded of the words given to us in 1 John chapter 2 that warn us about our loving the things of this world. Listen to those words!

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

So then, as we consider this tenth commandment from God about our not coveting those things that belong to our neighbor. And also, as we consider the words given to us by the Lord Jesus here in our scripture passage. It would seem that God is going beyond just instructing us not to "want", or to "lust after" some of the things that my neighbor owns. No, I fear that this sin of "coveting" is far more devious than that.

I'm reminded of the warning given in James chapter 1 about how most sin seems to start. There, the Lord tells us that,

¹⁴ . . . each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (James 1:14)

Here, we're told that most sin begins with just a simple thought within our minds. With the sin of coveting, it seems that it is as simple as our seeing something that we like. And if left to linger within our minds, we eventually start to want that thing, or at least one like it. And then, if it is left to linger further, that thought continues to grow and grow until it has fully grown into lust, and then into sin, and then to death.

It's the way of our minds. And it's the way of the sinful nature that we inherited from our first Dad and Mom, Adam and Eve.

Contrary to the beliefs of so many of the foolish people of our day, we are not born into this world "good" and "loving" and "kind". No, we are born with a heart that is already corrupt. And it's a short and easy step that carries us on into sins like that of "covetousness". Those words in Jeremiah chapter 17,

⁹The heart is deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked: who can know it?(Jeremiah 17:9)

These words of Jeremiah are simple to understand. You and I really do come into this world with a corrupt heart and mind. And it only gets worse as we grow up and live in amongst the corrupt culture of this world, learning its ways and desiring its corrupt fruits. And with that as our beginning is it any wonder that we do things like "coveting" as a natural tendency of our heart.

Here in these words of the Lord Jesus, He gives us at least two of the different ways that we can covet. Listen again to His words!

¹³. . . one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

¹⁴But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." (Luke 12:13-15)

While we aren't given the full context of this circumstance of the man asking Jesus to tell his brother to divide the inheritance from his father, each of the brothers may have been guilty of coveting. In the Jewish culture, an older brother most often was entitled to a larger portion of the father's estate. Perhaps the older brother was not dividing the inheritance properly. Or perhaps, the inheritance was not something that was easily divided and it would damage the

inheritance by dividing it. Not knowing those circumstances, the sin of covetousness may have been within either, or both, of the brothers.

We do know that covetousness was taking place because we know that Jesus always knew the thoughts of all the people around Him. And so, here Jesus brought their sin to the surface by saying,

¹⁵ . . . "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." (Luke 12:15)

And then also, to instruct us further about the sin of "coveting", Jesus went on to give the parable of the rich farmer who wanted more and more wealth. Listen to those words.

¹⁶Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. ¹⁷And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' ¹⁸So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" ²⁰But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' ²¹"So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:13-21)

We see here where the sin of "coveting" was not just limited to one person wanting something that another person has, it sometimes is just "wanting" and "lusting after" more and more gain, as Jesus put it, "in the abundance of the things we possess".

And that is another part of the nature of the sin of "coveting". It seems to have other, equally bad sins imbedded within it, feeding its nature, especially the sins of "envy" and of "greed".

And while yes, most all of us are greedy and envious, may I leave you to examine your own heart, and limit my observation of the sin of covetousness to examples and behaviors that I see taking place within myself, within my own heart and mind.

Firstly, I personally, really, really don't want to be intentionally greedy or envious. But I know that I am. It's within my nature. And unfortunately, too often I allow that sinful nature to rise up within me.

I think that I can also honestly say that I have never desired to be really wealthy, but I must confess that I have desired many of the things that wealth can buy. And while no, I may not want that new fancy pickup truck that my neighbor drives, unfortunately, I do want one just like it.

And I can recall in times past how I wanted a bigger and prettier house like that one that my neighbor lives in. And yes also, I have wanted the freedom to travel to exotic places and to have all the money those kinds of trips require.

And while such desires as those might not seem to fit the exact definition given in these Ten Commandments concerning this word "covet", as I read the words of Jesus here in our passage today, I have no doubt that His definition fits me quite well.

A friend of mine is fond of quoting some of the sayings passed along from his father. And with regard to money, when asked, "How much money he made," instead of answering the question directly, his father would simply reply, "never enough, never enough".

And that should bring a question to each of our minds . . . "When is enough ever enough?"

And although we may not be able to come up with as clever a response as my friend's father's answer, hidden within the depths of our hearts is probably something very similar to his, "never enough, never enough."

And that seems to be the kind of greed and covetousness that Jesus was telling us about in this parable of the rich farmer. When it comes to money and all the possibilities it has to offer us, travel, entertainment, the many things it can buy for us, the positions of power that it can bring to us, a strange hunger often develops within us, a hunger that seems never able to be satisfied.

And while you and I might not be able to imagine what "real wealth" is like, the dollar amount of wealth is really only relative to our imagination.

My wife and I do really love the home that God has provided for us, but we cannot help but marvel as some of the homes within a few blocks of ours that dwarf our house in size and in style. And that is minor as compared to most of the rest of the world.

Often, as I scroll through the various articles on my computer, a featured story will come up about the mansions and opulent lifestyles enjoyed by some of the billionaires in our country.

All of those amenities that are spoken about in the description of their homes, 30 bedrooms, 3 swimming pools, private theaters that seat over 100 people, yachts worth hundreds of millions of dollars, they bespeak that yearning that I mentioned a moment ago, the yearning that cries out “never enough, never enough”.

Most of those wealthy people did exactly as these scriptures describe, they tore down homes and buildings in order to build larger ones. And then listen to the words of verse 19!

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

And some of those wealthy people do that very thing, they relax, rest and enjoy their possessions, but oddly, most of them do not. Why? It is because of that yearning that never seems to go away, that yearning that continually cries out “never enough, never enough!” And so, they again tear down and build even bigger.

But lest we be guilty of noticing only the splinter in our wealthy brother's eye, while not seeing the boulder that is within our own eye, as I mentioned a moment ago, we need to examine ourselves about those same kinds of yearnings within our own souls, those yearnings that cry out within us “never enough!”

While it's true that you and I might never be able to imagine the sort of wealth and lifestyle that exists within those realms and circles of “real wealth”, we do need to keep it all in perspective.

As I mentioned a moment ago, money and the desire for money and the desire for the things that money can buy is all very, very relative.

That yearning, that cry of “never enough” is present even within the poorest of those among us, even within homeless men and women living on the streets. Along with the wealthiest of people, their hearts also cry out for more, and more and more, “never enough, never enough!”

And the wealth that people accumulate is not always gotten in the most legitimate of ways. Sometimes it is ill-gotten, earned at the expense or loss of others.

And while we hear most about the corrupt dealings of the rich and famous, the poor do the very same things to one another, cheating, lying, stealing from one another.

The foundational sins of greed, envy and covetousness that provoke and fuel the unceasing desire for more and more are exactly the same. It is only the amount of the money that we have that is different.

On the high end of the spectrum are probably people like Bernie Madoff whose “Ponzi schemes” cheated people out of nearly 50 billion dollars.

But at the other end of the spectrum, this very day, all over this country, there are armed robberies taking place, people being hurt and killed for just a few dollars.

Again, it is greed, envy and covetousness that are at the heart of such behavior, calling out within those men and women's souls, never enough, never enough.

But again, we must keep reminding ourselves that those sins are also present within each one of us, within you and me. Those sins just manifest themselves differently within us. You and I might not be violent, but are we any less greedy, covetous and envious.

I would suggest that some, perhaps many of those people who lost their fortunes to the Ponzi schemes were themselves also greedy, covetous and envious, looking for a higher than usual return on their investments. That is the common lure that draws people into such schemes?

Here in our scripture passage, a man, perhaps on the same relative income level as you and me, asked Jesus to mediate between him and his brother in regard to the family inheritance.

We don't know the circumstances of life that led up to that moment, but we do know from Jesus' response that there was "covetousness" within this man's heart. Perhaps he had been accustomed to enjoying a more comfortable lifestyle while his father was alive, but now with his father's passing, his provision was dramatically reduced. And instead of learning to live with less, he wanted Jesus to restore his comfortable lifestyle.

Folks, in all such matters of life, God truly does have a plan and a purpose. And if we are just so caught up in eating, drinking and being merry and do not consider the plans of God, He will surely bring about a provocation to cause us to make choices.

If the choices we make are similar to this young man, the choice to simply complain about the circumstance, then we should not be surprised if, as with this young man, God does not grant our petitions.

We need to understand that God wants you and me to be righteous and holy, not greedy, envious and covetous. He will not answer our prayers if they are founded upon such sins as those.

The charge to you and me from these scriptures is to turn from our common desires of greed, envy and covetousness and to instead become "givers" instead of "takers", and to do as verse 21 commands, "be rich toward God". If we do that, then our God will supply all of our needs.

God may bring us very little, He may bring us an adequate lifestyle, or He may choose to bring us a lavish provision. Our response is to ever and always be one of gratefulness and thankfulness to Him for His blessed provision.

Listen to these simple, but profound words of Philippians 4:19, and we'll close.

¹⁹And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Let's Pray.

