

The Peril of Greed

Basic Scripture resources: Exodus 20:17;
Ecclesiastes 5:10-6:2; Matthew 20:20-28;
Luke 12:13-21; 1 Timothy 6:6-10

God's law governs both our outward and our inward conduct, both our actions and our attitudes. Each area of life is important, and we must strive to please God with respect to each.

The more difficult to control are our inward attitudes. It is easier to refrain from murder than to keep from hating or being angry. It is easier to avoid adultery than to avoid lust. We can stifle a desire to boast, but the inner pride may remain. We can conquer all thoughts of stealing, but greed and covetousness may nevertheless dominate our lives.

While both aspects of our conduct are significant, we must learn to concentrate more upon developing the right inner attitudes. These are the more important, because what we are on the inside determines how we will act outwardly.

Why does a person murder? Because he has hatred or anger in his heart. What leads to adultery? Lust in the heart. Pride leads to boasting. A person steals because inwardly he is filled with greed or covetousness. As Jesus said, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Matthew 15:19).

The last of the Ten Commandments focuses primarily upon the inward life. "Thou shalt not covet," it says. Here God is telling us to have the right attitude toward things. Instead of being covetous, we must learn the grace of contentment. This is the basic principle underlying the last Commandment.

I. The Sin of Covetousness

Covetousness is a sin of the heart, a wrong attitude toward things. Basically, it is desire the desire to acquire, possess, and use things. Now certainly not all desire is forbidden. Indeed, we are meant to desire and earnestly seek that which pertains to the kingdom of God. Also, it is not wrong to desire to get and accumulate goods and wealth as such.

Clearly the forbidden covetousness is a particular kind of desire, a sinful and unlawful desire to acquire and own a particular item. How can we tell the difference? How can we distinguish our lawful desires and aspirations from forbidden covetousness? How can we identify evil covetousness in our lives?

Wanting Forbidden Things

We know we are guilty of covetousness first of all if we find ourselves wanting forbidden things, i.e., things that belong to someone else or things to which we have no rightful claim.

The commandment specifically forbids harboring covetous desire for a neighbor's possessions. "Thou shalt not covet . . . any thing that is thy neighbor's" (Exodus 20:17). This is the sin of envy. It may involve not only the desire to possess a certain object, but also resentment toward the neighbor because he happens to have it, and we do not. In this case covetousness violates Christian love.

Covetousness may also be the desire to possess a thing that has been specifically forbidden by God. This was the sin that invaded Achan's heart after God had prohibited any looting of the city of Jericho by the conquering Israelite army (Joshua 6:17-19). As Achan himself told it, "When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them" (Joshua 7:21).

Covetousness may take the form of a "something-for-nothing" attitude, in which we desire to acquire a thing without expending any money or labor for it. Such an attitude is bound to result when honest labor is no longer seen as the primary means to ownership. In a give-away society characterized by indulgent parents, easy welfare, and ubiquitous sweepstakes, a Christian must work very hard to keep from becoming covetous.

Wanting Too Many Things

Covetousness may also take the form of wanting too many things, desiring to get more than we need, or can use. This is the sin of greed.

In their pursuit of unnecessary wealth many men and women have overwhelmed themselves in work; hence their family life and their church life have been sacrificed. Truly 1 Timothy 6:9 says, "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."

Worshiping Things

In its most basic form covetousness is the desire to acquire earthly possessions for their own sakes or for selfish reasons. 1 Timothy 6:10 calls it "the love of money." Colossians 3:5 identifies it as idolatry. Indeed, it is the worship of things, or setting one's affection on things on the earth (Colossians 3:2). Jesus calls it serving mammon (which means money) in the sense of making it a god (Matthew 6:24). It is the sin of materialism.

This worshipful attitude toward things is strongly condemned by Christ in Luke 12:13-21. Here He says to a family squabbling over an inheritance, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." He reinforces this warning by telling the story of the rich, foolish farmer who gloated over his wealth and put his trust in his earthly treasures. God wrought swift judgment upon him: "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee." Then Jesus applies the judgment to covetous people everywhere: "So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

Here again we must emphasize that it is not things in themselves that are sinful, nor is the mere possession of things forbidden. It is the wrong attitude that is condemned, namely, the attitude of idolatrous attachment to, exclusive pursuit of, and foolish dependence upon things.

II. The Seriousness of Covetousness

Just how serious covetousness is can be seen from the account of Achan in Joshua 7. Here the sinister consequences of this sin are manifested to all.

First, covetousness is serious because it leads to all kinds of other sins. "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 Achan's case covetousness led directly to theft and deceit (Joshua 7:21). For others it leads to armed robbery, prostitution, gambling, tax evasion, profaning the Lord's Day, neglect of

parents, murder, or even warfare. The list is endless.

Covetousness is indeed a heart-sin; but if we harbor it in our hearts, it will sooner or later break forth into evil acts.

Another sad consequence of covetousness is that it hinders God's cause and kingdom. In the case of Achan, his disobedience led to the withdrawal of God's blessing and the subsequent defeat of the Israelites at Ai (Joshua 7:1-5).

Covetousness among Christians likewise hinders the advance of God's kingdom today. It robs God's church of the tithes and offerings needed for effective service in the areas of missions and benevolence. It robs the kingdom of many talented young men and women who choose vocations for the sake of money rather than ministry. It robs Christians of time they could be spending in local church work.

The seriousness of covetousness is seen finally in the severity with which it is condemned. In the case of Achan, both he and his family (who probably consented to what he did) were stoned to death, burned, and then covered with stones (Joshua 7:24-26).

God's Word is specific and severe: the covetous shall not enter the kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:10).

III. The Solution to Covetousness

God's solution to the attitude of covetousness is the development of another attitude, contentment. "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment, let us be therewith content" (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

We must be like Paul, who said, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Philippians 4:11).