

Coveting

HN 19/06/05 pm

Reading: Luke 12:1-34, Ephesians 5

Study Text: Deuteronomy 5:21

Sing Psalms: 27:7-10, 27:11-14, 23, 34:8-11

With his small business Dave was struggling to make ends meet. But then things started to get better. His business began to flourish. He took on staff and the profits grew. He bought a new house by the beach and a brand new car. The money kept flowing in. His financial advisor told him to buy shares and more property. He took up golf and went on trips. He planned to retire early and live off his investments. Dave had worked hard and got the breaks. Who would deny him the comforts of life? He had a secure future. ‘Good on you Dave’ we would say. But what would God say!

The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12) is perhaps the most disturbing of all that Jesus told. A man sowed his crop as usual. It was a great year and he got a bumper harvest. His storages started to overflow so he quickly built bigger ones. When the harvest was over he was a happy man. He could take things easy and enjoy life. His future was secure with all that produce stored up. What a good manager; ‘he has done well’ most would say. Except for God that is!

God said to him ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you (Luke 12:20). God condemned him to death. But why? Why such harsh judgment? What sin had he committed? It was the sin of covetousness. Jesus said Take heed and beware of covetousness, for ones life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses (Luke 12:15).

Matthew does not record this parable, but Luke has it set in the context of ‘sermon on the mount’ teaching. Jesus told this parable when a man in the crowd asked him to adjudicate on dividing a family inheritance. He had been teaching about the kingdom of God.

You shall not covet

We come to the final command of the Decalogue – *you shall not covet...* (Exodus 20:17, Deuteronomy 5:21). In Deuteronomy Moses mentions the neighbour’s wife before his house and the word ‘desire’ is used after the initial phrase – but there is no essential difference.

This command is unlike any other, with the exception of the first, in that it focuses on the heart, on what a person thinks and desires, and not on actions. Of course all sin begins in the heart as Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount – hatred leads to murder, lust leads to adultery and desire leads to theft. But this command specifically targets the heart of man. To be driven by a desire for what your neighbour has, or a desire for more of the things of this world is sin.

The Pharisees in their zeal to uphold the law failed to see import of this command it would seem. They stressed the outward actions as do all legalists. The Sabbath was like the touchstone

by which they measured law breaking. But a Pharisee who believed in Jesus, the apostle Paul, was greatly disturbed by this command. He realised that the law was not just about what one does. God looks on the heart and he judges thoughts as well as words and actions.

How can a person obey this law? How can we control thoughts and attitudes of the heart? How can we stop coveting? *I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said you shall not covet* wrote Paul (Romans 7:7). What I will to do I do not do, but I do what I don't want to do he said. Here was a man who realized that sin infected his heart and he could not cure it. This commandment condemned him, as it does every man. He cried out *Oh wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Only Jesus can cure hearts that are infected by sin. Only Jesus has the power to touch your heart and cleanse it of sin. He can take your covetous heart, a heart that desires the things of the world and give you a new heart, a heart that desires the things of God, a heart that seeks first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.

I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came sin revived and I died said Paul (Romans 7:7). Jesus came to fulfil the law. Realising our inability to keep the law we must cry out as Paul did. Not only has Jesus taken the punishment for our disobedience but only in him can we walk according to the commands of God. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse our hearts of sin. Only Jesus can give us a new heart, a heart that does not covet the things of the world.

'Affluenza' is the title of a new book telling of modern man's desire for the things of the world. It truly is an affliction; it is a congenital disease of the soul of every man. 'Keeping up with the Jones' some used to call it. Now it is keeping up with David Jones. People must have the right labels on everything. We struggle and strive to have what the next person has- the latest model and the biggest and the best of everything.

To have more- that is what the word covet means. Bigger barns. Hoarding wealth. *You have heaped up treasures in the last days.* This was the judgment God pronounced upon the rich, upon those who hoarded wealth (James 5:3). You have hoarded the treasure of this world for yourself but are not rich toward God – this was the judgment upon the rich man in the parable (Luke 12:21).

The owners of a ferry on Lake Victoria in Africa kept on taking more and more passengers on board thinking the more passengers they had the greater would be their profits. What happened – you can guess? The ferry sank in the middle of the lake and all perished. In their effort to get more the owners lost everything – they lost their ferry and they lost their life. *Beware of covetousness. Fool! This night your soul will be required of you.*

Idolatry

You shall have no other gods before me. This is the first commandment. This tenth commandment takes us back to the first. Covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5, Ephesians 5:5).

The Israelites were about to enter Canaan when Moses was explaining the law God gave at Horeb. The inhabitants of Canaan worshipped other gods- gods of wood and stone. They worshipped fertility gods in the hope of getting increase in their family, in their flocks and in their fields. Some Hindus worship Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, hoping their business will do well and they will get rich.

The God of Israel, the Almighty God, the Creator, will not tolerate the worship of other gods. You shall have no other gods before me. He promises to provide for his people. He sent them manna in the desert. He was bringing them to a land flowing with milk and honey. He warned them against forgetting him when they came into this land of plenty (Deuteronomy 6:12). Listen to the words of wisdom from Proverbs 30:9 – give ~~me~~ neither poverty nor riches... *lest I be full and deny you and say who is the Lord?*

The man's fields in the parable yielded abundantly. But did he thank God? He did not acknowledge God in any way. See what he said: **I** will do this – **I** will build bigger barns, **I** will store all **my** crops and **my** goods. I, me, my- he was full of pride. No thought of God in his proud and covetous heart. Exalting self is tantamount to idolatry.

You would be horrified to see a man worshipping a grotesque idol of wood, stone or metal. But what about the idolatry in our own backyard- covetousness! We have an epidemic of covetousness. The love of money, the love of the things of the world rules in the heart of multitudes. What is the difference between superannuation and hoarding wealth in the last days? What is the difference between building bigger barns and building an investment portfolio?

Put to death your members that are on earth...evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry. No covetous person, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God (Colossians 3:5, Ephesians 5:5). Beware; covetousness can so easily come into the church. I am rich; I have become wealthy and have need of nothing (Revelation 3:17). This was what a church was saying. Jesus said I will spew you out. Repent. Behold I stand at the door and knock. How many in the church today are trusting in 'my nest egg' or 'my investments' rather than trusting in God?

Are you busy building bigger barns? Beware says Jesus. Beware of covetousness. Take the advice of the apostle who was delivered from covetousness by Jesus Christ. He said I have learned to be content (Philippians 4:11). Whatever my situation, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have plenty or little, I have learned to be content. Remember *godliness with contentment is great gain* (I Timothy 6:6).

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon