

## Covetousness

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Last May or June, there were so many prom gowns being stolen from stores that a large number of dress stores decided to discontinue carrying prom dresses. Some stores put out rewards for the stolen dresses, and several stores even hired investigators with pictures of the gowns to go out to the proms and try to locate the dresses that were stolen. And what they found all over the nation—not just in one isolated place, but the whole nation!—was that there was a huge increase in the number of gowns that were being stolen by girls attending proms.

These girls were coveting these gowns so much, that were beyond their price ranges, that their coveting drove them to stealing. Some of the girls actually were arrested, and either fined or put in jail for the theft. It shows the condition of the United States and how covetousness is just running rampant and driving people to do all types of things. That is the subject that I would like to speak about today.

**Luke 12:15** And 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."

So we know that covetousness is sin, and that it breaks the tenth commandment. Therefore, we know it is extremely important to God that we not covet.

Covetousness can be defined as, “wanting something with a deep burning, especially something that another person has; it is a longing for with envy.” Envious and greed are synonyms for the word covetous.”

Now if you would turn with me to II Kings 5, we will take a look at a story, an example of how covetousness leads to lying and stealing.

**II Kings 5:1-5** Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valor, but a leper. And the Syrians had gone out on raids, and had brought back captive a young girl from the land of Israel. She waited on Naaman's wife. Then she said to her mistress, "If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria, for he would heal him of his leprosy." And Naaman went in and told his master, saying, "Thus and thus said the girl who is from the land of Israel." Then the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So he departed and took with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing.

Now this amount is in today's standards, many commentaries said that it was about \$3,800,000. This was not a situation that lacked an importance to the king of Syria, and to his commander of the army. This was important, and they were willing to spend almost anything to get it resolved.

So as we go down through the story, we find that the king of Syria sent a letter to the king of Israel requesting that he heal Naaman of this leprosy.

Well, the problem was the king of Israel said, "What does he expect from me? Can I bring a man to life, or put a man to death? Am I God?" And so he tore his clothes because he was so concerned about it because he thought the Syrians were trying to stir up some trouble by giving the king of Israel something to do beyond what he could do. And so he was all worried.

Elisha came along, hearing about him tearing his clothes, and he said, "Wait a minute! Don't worry about it. Have Naaman come to me, and I'll take care of that." So we pick up that part of the story in verse 10:

**II Kings 5:10-11** And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became furious, and went away and said, "Indeed, I said to myself, 'He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy.'

So Naaman expected this great miracle in front of everyone, because he felt that he was such a great man that he deserves some great miracle to be performed in front of everyone. It says earlier on that Elisha did not even come out to meet Naaman. He sent a messenger to him, and Naaman was actually outside the door of Elisha's house. Elisha did not even go out to meet him, so Naaman got fairly angry at that point. And then Naaman's reaction was, "Well, why don't I just go back and wash in the rivers of Damascus, because they are much cleaner than the River Jordan, which I'm told to wash in?" According to geography books, the River Jordan is somewhat cloudy, but these rivers back in Damascus in Syria were actually very clear because the runoff was from the mountains, so he had very clear water. So he is wondering, "Why should I go and wash in" what he considered "dirty water when I can go back to Syria and wash in the clean water?" So he was reluctant all the way through, as far as doing what he was commanded by Elisha to do.

So finally his servants convinced him, "What harm is it? Go do it. It's easy to do. Just go wash in the Jordan seven times." So he did, and he was healed.

The principle here that we see is that had Elisha gone out and actually performed the miracle out in the open, then Elisha would have been the one to receive the glory, or some of the glory, and not God. But in this case, God was able to receive all of the glory, and Elisha was very low key about the whole thing.

Now this does not end the story. This actually begins the story having to do with Gehazi.

**II Kings 5:20** But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, "Look, my master has spared Naaman this Syrian, while not receiving from his hands what he brought; but as the LORD lives, I will run after him and take something from him."

What happened was Naaman had offered Elisha the \$3.8 million in payment for his service in healing him of the leprosy. And Elisha turned it down. Elisha wanted the glory to go to God.

Well, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, got to coveting that money and started calculating how he could come by it. So what he did is he chased after Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army. We pick that up in verse 22:

**II Kings 5:22** And he said, "All is well. My master has sent me, saying, 'Indeed, just now two young men of the sons of the prophets have come to me from the mountains of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of garments.'"

Here we see Gehazi is lying to get hold of this money that he was coveting. What he is asking for is approximately \$380,000 for his two servants there, which actually he is to get.

**II Kings 5:24-25** When he came to the citadel, he took them from their hand, and stored them away in the house; then he let the men go, and they departed. Now he went in and stood before his master. Elisha said to him, "Where did you go, Gehazi?" And he said, "Your servant did not go anywhere."

So we see a lie came from that covetousness. Stealing came from that covetousness, and now the lie.

**II Kings 5:26** Then he said to him, "Did not my heart go with you when the man turned back from his chariot to meet you? Is it time to receive money and to receive clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male and female servants?"

He is asking Gehazi, "Is it really the time to receive all of these physical possessions?" Here, this took away from the glory of God in healing that leprosy. Gehazi was representing the ministry of the prophets at that time by being a servant, although he was not a prophet.

**II Kings 5:27** "Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever." And he went out from his presence leprous, as white as snow.

Now you see there that obviously God was not happy with the covetousness, and the lying and the stealing that Gehazi committed.

But an interesting point here is, if you imagine, what would happen if they and their descendants received leprosy forever? How long would their descendants continue to have children?

What Elisha was doing is he was putting an end to Gehazi's genealogy. So obviously covetousness is a very serious matter.

Now covetousness is also idolatry.

When the Cabbage Patch™ dolls first came out in the early 1980s (we all remember those), people were literally fighting each other for them. Some women actually got down into wrestling on the floor over the Cabbage Patch™ dolls. People were hoarding them to sell to others who could not get hold of the Cabbage Patch™ dolls, and they were selling them for astronomical prices. And you could barely find one in the United States, because people were not buying one doll. They were buying many, many dolls and hoarding them. As soon as the stores would get them in, remember, they get them maybe on the shelves, and people would be in lines just standing there like vultures ready to pounce on these hunks of cloth and plastic. The covetousness was just amazing! In contrast to that, we went to England that year, and there were Cabbage Patch™ dolls on many of the shelves, just floor to ceiling, and hardly anyone was buying them.

So you see what advertising can do in working up people's covetousness, making them desire the things that they see in the news, or in advertisements, and that type of thing.

This does not end. It continues.

Last year, the Tickle Me Elmo™ doll broke sales records. This year stores could not keep Beanie Babies™ on the shelves because of the uncontrolled burning desire that people had to buy them. Many were buying many Beanie Babies™ and did not care what the costs were.

So does it end? No.

Now in this Christmas season we have the Sing ‘N Snore Ernie™, which has already surpassed the sale of the Tickle Me Elmo™ dolls, which broke records last year. So the covetousness in this country is running at a fierce level.

And I would like to at this point, qualify the statement that just because somebody buys a Tickle Me Elmo™, or a Beanie Baby™, or something of that sort, does not mean that they are coveting. It is the attitude [motivation] behind it that really matters.

Turn to Colossians 3 and we will take a look at what the apostle Paul has to say about covetousness, just exactly what we have been talking about here.

**Colossians 3:5** Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Some translations use the word “greed” for the word “covetousness.” I am reading from the *New King James*, and it is covetousness here. But the Greek word for covetousness is *pleonexion*. And it is a compound form whose root meaning indicates, “A desire to have more than is needed.” It has a much wider significance than its English equivalent. It means greediness; propacity [?]; entire disregard of the rights of others. It is the arrogant and ruthless assumption that all other persons and things exist for one's own benefit. Generally, the usual meaning of this word is, “a ruthless desire for, and seeking after material things.”

Now the attitude is identified with idolatry because it puts self-interest in things in place of God. So whatever we seek contrary to God's will, we covet. And if we lust after and covet something more than that we obey God, then that thing becomes an idol to us, and we serve that idol. And that you will find that in Romans 6:16.

If you would, turn with me to Proverbs 1, covetousness is never satisfied and brings many sorrows. It only produces negative results like hoarding, stealing, lying, murdering, and apostasy, to name a few. But covetous also causes something else.

**Proverbs 1:18-19** But they lie in wait for their own blood, they lurk secretly for their own lives. So are the ways of everyone who is greedy for gain; it takes away the life of its owners.

So we see there what happens eventually to a covetous person; they lose their life. Covetousness can take a person's mind. It can dominate it and make you think of nothing else. You can probably think back in your own life of things that you really wanted badly. For a while, it dominated your mind.

We are all human and we have all gone through it. We all recognize that. But one way to combat covetousness is with contentment.

The apostle Paul states in Philippians 4:11 that he learned to be content in whatever state he was in. Now Paul tells Timothy that we should be content rather than desiring to accumulate material things.

**I Timothy 6:6-7** Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.

So right there we see that material goods will not do us any good after this life.

**I Timothy 6:8** And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.

So there we see the basic needs of each one of us—food and clothing. Anything beyond that, we have to be careful that we are not coveting it.

There is nothing wrong with getting material things. We like to be able to sit on comfortable furniture, and have those extra things, those knickknacks that turn a house into a home. So there is nothing wrong with that.

But we should realize that the basic things that we need, and that God promises to us, is food and clothing. And reading on in verse 9,

**I Timothy 6:9-10** But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

So we see there that covetousness or greediness can drive us, it can pull us away from obeying God. It can pull us out of the church if we do not keep tabs on it. Think: each time we want something, ask yourself, "Am I coveting this?" If we let it run with us, if we let it control our minds, we are only looking to sorrow and unhappiness. So it is something that even though it is the last commandment it is still extremely important, as we saw with Gehazi's situation.

Our human nature deceives us so that we do not even realize when we are coveting. As physical human beings, we want to satiate the self. We want to make the self feel good and many times what we want physically, material things will satisfy that temporarily.

How many times have we seen where somebody has been unhappy and so they have gone out and they have purchased themselves something that they wanted; maybe they cannot afford it, but they have purchased it, taken it home, and then regretted it because they could not afford it. But for the moment, for that split second when they were buying it, they were happy.

Turn with me if you will to Hebrews 13.

**Hebrews 13:5** Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."



So we have God's promise that He will provide us with food and clothing as our basic necessities, and He does at times give us other blessings for us to enjoy. But really, the only promise that we can expect from God, as we obey Him, is the food and clothing. But God is so kind that He does give us more than that.

Covetousness is needless, because we have the promise that God will never leave nor forsake us. The words emphasize the complete reliability of God here. We have heard Richard and John Reid, and several others, mention how God, here, says He will never leave nor forsake us, it is actually saying *never, never, never, never, never*—five times! We have nothing to worry about in that area.

God's people are secure no matter what comes because He is within us. Besides this wonderful fact, the petty secures his worldly possessions, his position, and the like; they do not matter at all. No matter what we can accumulate or get in this world, when we die, we will not take it with us, and it will not save any of us.

**Proverbs 15:16** Better is a little with the fear of the LORD, than great treasure with trouble.

Covetousness promotes self-centeredness; it brings only sorrow and unhappiness. Take heed and beware of covetousness because our life does not consist in the abundance of things.

It is not wrong to want material things necessarily. It is the attitude in the want that determines whether or not we are coveting. But Paul tells us in I Timothy 6:

**I Timothy 6:11** But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.