

Freedom from Covetousness

Luke 12:13–21 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: When I am asked to speak to a group of pastors, often they want me to speak on the subject of giving or generosity. Our church is known as a bit of an anomaly when it comes to the trends on local church giving. They presume it is something I harp on a lot. They will often ask, “How many times a year do you do a series of sermons on giving?”. I rarely do that. In fact, we hardly mention it in the service. Yet, week after week, the Lord provides far beyond all we could ask or think through your eager generosity.

I can’t explain why that is the case. I can tell you that our commitment to preaching through books of the Bible has served us well, simply because the subject will come up at appropriate intervals and when it does, no one has to suspect an ulterior motive. It’s simply, what’s next.

Such is the case today - as we study through the Gospel of Luke, we find that Jesus was not speaking on the subject of money, but someone from the crowd raised a question that sparked this week’s teaching from the lips of our Lord.

CONTEXT: Remember, Jesus had been preparing his disciples for the onslaught of fear and anxiety that they would soon be facing as the time of the cross drew near. Last week, we saw His teaching regarding the illogical nature of fear.

Well, right in the middle of that sermon - we read in verse 13...

TEXT: Luke 12:13–21 (ESV)

¹³ “Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ But he said to him, “**Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?**”

Now that was an odd thing to ask in the middle of a sermon about fear, wouldn’t you agree? Most of the time when someone raises an impromptu question, it is designed to trap Jesus, but not this guy. It seems that this guy woke up that morning concerned about that inheritance and he figured, perhaps, Jesus could do something about it.

There was precedence for this sort of thing. The standard division of an inheritance was that the eldest son would receive half of the inheritance and the remaining sons would divide the other half amongst themselves. The daughters, would not be included because it was assumed they would marry and be included in that family’s wealth.

But, from time to time, for one reason or another, this did not seem appropriate - so there was a clause in the Jewish traditions that a faithful Rabbi could be appointed to

adjudicate such disputes. Thus, the objection from Jesus - “who appointed me the judge in this case?”.

Then, Jesus takes the interruption as an opportunity to teach a lesson regarding covetousness.

¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all **covetousness**, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”.

ILLUSTRATION: The late R.C. Sproul was fond of asking his congregation, “If suddenly the Constitution of the United States were lost and you were charged with the duty of establishing a new law, and the parameters of your duty limited you to only 10 laws, what 10 laws would you include?”.

Most would probably include homicide, “you shall not murder”. Many would include theft, “you shall not steal”, but how many would waste one of their 10 laws on the prohibition against covetousness?

But God in His infinite wisdom did include the 10th commandment - “Thou shall not covet”. You see, in many ways the other 9 commandments can only be broken after the 10th commandment. It all starts with covetousness.

COVET - It’s the Hebrew word “CHAH MODE” translated here “Covet”. This Hebrew word occurs 21 times in the OT, it is translated “covet” 4 times, “delight” twice, “pleasant” once, “beauty” once, “lust” once, and “delectable things” once.

It means to have a strong internal desire to possess something that God has assigned to other people.

You don’t steal until you have first coveted.
You don’t murder until you have first coveted.

The 10th command is unique from the previous 9 in a few ways:

1. Coveting is entirely *internal*.

All of the other commands require you to do something physically in order to break them in the simplest way.

- You have to form an Idol in order to have another god before the true God.
- You have to speak in order to lie.
- You have to strike in order to murder someone.

But thou shall not covet... ***is completely internal.***

2. Coveting does not have a *criminal* penalty.

To murder is both **morally** wrong, **spiritually** wrong, and **legally** wrong. There are legal ramifications for murder. Coveting is spiritually wrong, but not illegal. So it serves as a reminder then, that you may be legally innocent but spiritually guilty.

3. Coveting is *specific* in its object and *general* in its effect.

There is a reason Moses gives us specific things not to covet...neighbor's house, wife, servant, etc. Because that is how it works. There is always a very specific object that we covet... but then the repercussions of coveting are very general and pervasive.

For example, you covet your neighbor's house... but you aren't just discontent with your house, you are **discontent** with your life.

That by the way is the litmus test of discerning whether or not you are breaking the 10th commandment... **a deep seated discontentment.**

4. Coveting is the most illusive sin we can commit.

That's why Jesus said in **Luke 12:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ And he said to them, ***"Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness..."***

This is a sin you may be committing and not even be aware that you are actively engaged in it.

Jesus didn't say that about any other sin...adultery... you know it when you are committing adultery. Murder...you know it when you are committing murder. But if covetousness is in your heart, it often has to be revealed to you through things like this text and sermon.

Over the years I've had a number of people come in to confess sins to me. I've never had anyone confess covetousness.

No one thinks they are covetous, but everyone knows someone who is.

One pastor said, "For Americans, **greed is to sin what North Dakota is to U.S. states** – it's easy to forget that it exists."

Randy Alcorn, in his book, "Money, Possessions, and Eternity," writes, "The comic strip Cathy depicts an interesting dialogue between a young man and a woman. Pointing to each item as they refer to it, first one and then the other says, *"Safari clothes that will never be near a jungle; aerobic footwear that will never set foot in an aerobics class; deep sea dive watch that will never get damp; keys to a four-wheeled drive vehicle that will never experience a hill; architectural magazines we don't read, filled with pictures of furniture that we don't like; financial strategy software keyed to a checkbook that is lost somewhere under the computer that no one knows how to work; an art poster*

from an exhibit we never went to, by an artist we never heard of.”

Finally, with blank stares one says, "**Abstract materialism has arrived,**" to which the other rejoins, "**Yes, we have moved past the things we want and need, and are buying those things that have nothing to do with our lives.**"

IF GOD SHOWS US THAT WE HAVE COVETOUSNESS IN OUR HEART, WHAT ARE WE TO DO ABOUT IT? THE ANSWER IS IN THE PARABLE THAT FOLLOWS.

Luke 12:16–21 (ESV)

¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully,¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’²⁰ But God said to him,

1. Remember the Imminence of Eternity.

20b. ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you.’

Now, that is the only time in all the Bible that God Himself declared someone to be a fool, a man who was so short sighted that he made his decisions without calculating for the eternal.

Notice, God’s estimation of this man was very different than how we might look at him. We might hope he would write a book on financial management, good farming practices. We might hope a man like this would marry our daughter, or join our church. God says, “this man is an utter fool”.

Why? Because he makes decisions about the future direction of his life based on how it will effect his financial bottom line only. Not based upon God’s calling on his life, not based upon the written Word of God – but based on his money! WHAT WILL THIS COST ME? WHAT WILL I PROFIT?

ILLUSTRATION: Suppose a group of men are meeting for breakfast each Tuesday at 6AM to study the Word together and pray for one another and they have invited you to join them. But instead of considering how much you need Godly friends, how much this could help your marriage, how much this could expedite your discipleship... the first thing that comes to mind is, you won’t be able to open shop as early on Tuesdays and you might lose a sale or two because of it.

The problem is not that you are diligent about the bottom line of your business... the problem is that you are living like that is the **ONLY bottom line.**

NOW, that may not resonate with you... you may not have enough money to worry that much about it. Let me reorient the parable a bit in a way that may hit closer to home.

A certain man had a son who excelled at baseball. He thought to himself, "What shall I do for my son that he might play Division 1 in college?" And he said this, "I will not only make certain that he never misses a practice, but I will also have him try out for new teams, travel ball. And I will say to my soul, you have a talented athlete on your hands...one day he may be a starter for the Braves".

And God said, "You fool, your son will die tragically at 17 and be cast into eternity unprepared".

There was a day when the coach would call the church office to see what time youth group started on Wednesday night, what the dates of VBS were, because he knew it was a waste of time to schedule a practice if something was happening at the church. Those days are gone, because somewhere along the way parents forgot what really matters.

Wednesday night in our study of Ecclesiastes, we mentioned the fact that, French philosopher, **Jean-Paul Sartre** said, "*Without an infinite reference point all finite reference points are absurd*". His conclusion was that there is no infinite reference point... Solomon disagreed.

In other words, if there is no eternity - nothing matters. Your life has no more meaning than that of a cockroach. The love you profess to feel for your children is nothing more than a biochemical product of evolution that emerged to ensure the propagation of the species. You will live, you will die, and you will be forgotten.

So without an infinite reference point, all of your finite reference points, like wealth... are absurd. That was the conclusion of Sartre.

2. Remember All Things Are On Loan.

20C... and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

At first glance, that seems an odd question to throw in the dialogue. Who will own all of your stuff when you are gone? But, that question is in fact a powerful reminder.

Solomon wrestled with this idea in Ecclesiastes - all of the things I accumulate will one day belong to someone else, and who knows if that man will be a wise man or a fool.

You will leave this world the same way you entered it...with nothing.

ILLUSTRATION: You've heard about the man who asked to be buried with all of his gold. Then when he got to heaven, St. Peter asked, "What do you have there?". The

man opened the bag and showed Peter all of the gold. Puzzled, Peter asked, “Concrete?”.

Over and over again, scripture reminds us that we don’t own anything - and everything is simply being loaned to us as stewardship. After we die, God will let someone else oversee them a while. Then they will die. And it goes on and on.

Screwtape, the well-known demon of C.S. Lewis’ creation, said, *“Humans are always putting up claims to ownership which sound equally funny in heaven and in hell.”*

Think of it, God always has and always will own everything that is.

- **Psalm 24:1** — “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”
- **Leviticus 25:23** — “The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.”
- **Haggai 2:8** — “ ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”

So it always was and always will belong to GOD. About every 80 or so years, He lets someone else oversee it... to see how they will do. “Will this new steward leverage this stuff for eternity... or will they lose their soul?”

EVERYTHING IS ON LOAN:

- Those kids you are raising - they are loaned to you for a time. You can’t raise them any way you want. God has spoken about how they should be raised.
- We have a title on this building, we are borrowing a building for the Central Campus. But in reality, both are just ours to steward for a little while. In 100 years, if Jesus doesn’t return first, other people will be gathering here. Who knows what they will do?
- Our Nation is a stewardship; we inherited it from our forefathers, we will leave it to our children...but what will we leave them?

God says this man was a fool because he forgot the fact that the harvest, the barns, the wealth he was chasing, would only be his for a moment. Then he would die and answer to God for his life.

3. Remember Kingdom Economics.

²¹ *“So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”*

There is a mysterious reality in Scripture. Over and over, God reminds us that worldly possessions are meaningless. But there is also this dichotomy we find in the text that suggests, that **we can STORE UP WEALTH IN HEAVEN by the proper use of wealth on earth.** (Repeat that).

Jesus says it this way in Matthew 6:19–20 (ESV)

¹⁹ “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

Let me explain:

This is how we operate in our family. I try to do my job well and earn the salary that the church provides for us. Then, we take 10% of what we receive and give it to this local church. WHY? Here is how I look at it: Jesus told the Apostles to go into all the world and make disciples, teaching them to obey, and baptizing them... that is the Great Commission. We read the book of ACTS and we find that they interpreted that to mean that they were to establish churches all over the world.

The primary strategy Jesus had to evangelize the world was the planting of strong Biblical churches. That was HIS idea.

So, I'm not going to think of something more clever than the Apostles or Jesus. I'm going to invest in my local church, and those things that expand and strengthen the ministry of local churches, with the understanding that one day I'll stand before Christ and answer for that decision... and I think he will be pleased that I invested in His idea.

It is such a strange dichotomy. We can exchange meaningless worldly wealth, for eternal Heavenly wealth.

ILLUSTRATION: If you do your job well and earn money, and then you buy a guy lunch... and during that lunch you had a brief conversation about Jesus, it just might be that in 10 million years that discussion will be the most important conversation in that man's entire life.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION:

Addison Leech was the 2nd husband of Elizabeth Elliot (2 husbands died). He was a college professor. Two young ladies in his class became Christians and they wanted to become missionaries. The parents said, “Oh no, look, now dear you've had a religious experience but you need some security. We want you to get a master's degree, take a job or two and get your career off the ground and we want you to have some money in the bank so you will have some security.” The girls came to Dr. Leech and said, “What do we say???” Dr. Leech said, “Tell them that we are on a little ball of rock spinning through space called earth and one day under each one of us is going to open a trap door and we are going to fall off – underneath will be the everlasting arms or nothing at all.

If this is all there is, if this is all you get...**NOTHING REALLY MATTERS.** Be a hedonist, eat, drink and be merry, be wealthy, be popular. But if there is a God in Heaven, and if He will stand as Judge, then **EVERYTHING MATTERS** and life should be lived accordingly.