

The Least Understood Sin?

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Jericho was the first city the Israelites came to when they crossed over into Canaan. God gave them a total victory and told them to go through the city and utterly destroy the people and the livestock. But the gold, silver, bronze, and iron things were to be put in the treasury of the Lord. This warning was given: “keep yourselves from the things under the ban, lest you covet them” (Josh. 6:18).

Covetousness has been called “the least confessed sin” (St. Francis de Sales). When did you ever hear someone admit to it? When was the last time you coveted? That may indicate that it is also the least understood sin.

Covetousness is not just desiring something what someone else has. It is desiring something that I have no right to possess. In the 10 commandments, Israel was commanded not to covet their neighbor’s house, wife, servant, ox, donkey, “or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Ex. 20:17). Why? These things did not belong to them; they had no right to them. In Jericho, the reason the gold, silver, and iron things were banned was because they had been claimed by the Lord. The Israelites were to keep themselves from things they had no right to.

What makes covetousness so least-confessed and misunderstood?

Covetousness is a silent sin. “Thou shalt not covet” (Ex. 20:17) was different than the other commandments. The other laws had to do with things that were outward and noticeable when you violated them: do not “commit,” “kill,” “steal,” and “bear.” But the tenth commandment was inward, having to do with the thoughts. In Jericho, Achan “took” some of the things under the ban because he first “saw” and then “coveted” them (Josh. 7:19-21).

All sin begins in the heart. What silently starts on the inside is ultimately expressed in actions. That’s why covetous and covetousness are also translated “unjust gain” (Prov. 28:16), “dishonest gain” (Jer. 22:17) and “bribe” (Ex. 18:21). The desire for something you have no right to have leads to use dishonest means to obtain it. What is your heart’s desire? Do you have a right to it? If not, don’t even think about it.

Covetousness is a subtle sin. Jesus said, “Beware, and be on guard against every form of covetousness” (Luke 12:15). Watch for and then guard yourself. Why? Because it is

such a subtle sin. “Every form” or “every kind” of covetousness tells us that this sin manifests itself in different ways.

This is not just about money. Pornography is another way of “coveting your neighbor’s wife” (Deut. 5:21). You have no right to her. You can covet attention. What is our motive for posting things on social media? Is it so people will be impressed that we have reached a status in life where we can take this vacation, live in this house, or purchase these things? You can covet praise. In the worship service, do we serve for God’s glory or for our own? That is reserved for Him and Him alone.

Covetousness is a destructive sin. It was one of the “seven deadly sins” identified by Pope Gregory I in 590 A.D. But God called it a deadly sin long before any man did. In 1 Cor. 6:9-10, it is listed alongside fornicators, idolaters, homosexuals, and drunkards as those who shall not “inherit the kingdom of God.” In Eph. 5:5, “no immoral or impure person or covetous man...has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” That which is silent and subtle in the end is destructive and deadly.

And yet, how often have people pursued this path? Achan saw and coveted and took. As a result, he and his family were stoned, burned, and then covered by a heap of stones (Josh 7:24-26). Judas, one of the 12 apostles, gave up Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. And he was so overcome with grief that he hanged himself. Ananias and Sapphira were not required to sell their land. But they coveted the praise of the local church. And they were struck dead on the spot. When you don’t guard against every form of it, you destroy your life and lose your soul.

The cure for covetousness is contentment. “Let your conservation be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you, nor will I ever forsake you’” (Heb. 13:5). Is God’s companionship enough for you? Then make Him your heart’s desire.