

How Then Shall We Live?: Contentment In An Age Of Theft

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July 31, 2011

Psalm 62, James 4:1-8a, 1 Timothy 6:3-19

Our final Scripture reading this morning comes from 1 Timothy 6:3-19. Listen now to God's Word. "If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time -- God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen. Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life."

Theft may be the most romanticized of all crimes. Everyone knows the name of Robin Hood, who takes from the rich and gives to the poor. Take *Les Miserables*, where Inspector Javier goes after Jean Valjean, the convict whose crime was stealing a loaf of bread. Of course, it's Javier who's the crazy one. One of the most popular movie series of recent note is the **Ocean's Eleven** franchise, which is essentially a series of cons and heists. I admit that I love the puzzle aspect of it; it's not so much about what they steal but how they go about doing it.

But more and more, our world has given up on theft. It's become acceptable to steal if you aren't caught and there's no direct damage to another person. It's still uncool to steal your buddy's stereo, but ripping off a nameless, faceless corporation? Not so much. And in our technological age, theft is something you can do from the comfort of your own home. All of it comes from the deeper issue of covetousness. Today, we're going to talk about how the Christian is called not just to a life where we keep our hands off of other people's stuff, but a life marked by contentment. In the end, we'll see that real satisfaction in life comes from a deep relationship with God – everything else will just leave us craving more.

The Ten Commandments forbid stealing; that's no big surprise. But the most surprising of the Ten Commandments that's directly related to theft is the last one – the prohibition against coveting anything your neighbor has. The other nine commandments are almost provable in some way. You can demonstrate ways you have honored your mother and father or how you kept the Sabbath. If you don't murder or steal or create little idols for yourself, the lack of evidence shows your faithfulness.

But coveting is unlike all the rest. How do you prove that you didn't covet your neighbor's wife or his fields or his cattle? You don't. It's the only command that is a direct examination of one's heart. In the New Testament, Jesus pointed out the correlation between hating somebody and murdering them in your heart or lusting after someone and committing adultery in your heart. But he didn't have to make the connection between theft and coveting because the Old Testament had already done it for Him. Even in the Ten Commandments, God had shown that His Law over Israel was not just about following a series of rules but having a right heart with Himself and with one's neighbors.

Perhaps the most important and telling story of theft in the Old Testament is the story of Achan. The Israelites had just left the wilderness and Joshua had just led them to an incredibly important victory at Jericho. God had taken down this heavily fortified city and given it to the Hebrews. God's command was that they utterly destroy it; it was to be dedicated to God. But as Achan did his job, he saw some gold and some other stuff and he coveted it. He took it home and hid it in his tent. Now the things he took were large enough that it couldn't be hidden well; his whole family had to have known what he did. But he said nothing.

Then the Israelites head to the city of Ai and they think, "Hey, this place is tiny in comparison to Jericho. We don't need to send everybody in; let's take a strike force of about 3000 men and let them take the city." So this contingent heads to Ai, but they get routed badly, and 36 men die in the retreat. When Joshua humbles himself before God and pleads with Him why this has happened, God says, "I wasn't with you because of sin in the camp." To deal with it, Joshua brings the people before God and God eventually singles out Achan. Achan admits his sin in front of the whole camp, and he and his whole family – who knew what he had done – are sentenced to death as a result.

Now this story seems super strong. Why did Achan's whole family suffer for his sin? Why did anyone have to die for stealing, even though it was something that belonged to God? I believe it goes to show the deep seriousness of coveting and theft. Achan's sin directly resulted in the death of 36 men. Had he taken God seriously, had he not taken what he did, God would have been with the Israelites in the first battle of Ai.

Meanwhile, Jesus deal with issues of covetousness countless times. There's the story of a young man who thinks he has everything together; he tells Jesus that he's followed all the commandments since he was a boy. Jesus tells him to sell everything he has and then to come follow Him – and the man walks away sad because of his vast wealth. Jesus replies that it's incredibly difficult for the wealthy to inherit the Kingdom of God. This story was so important that all three of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – include it.

Jesus warns over and over again that those who are not rich towards God and towards others, those who are well-fed and lack nothing, will find themselves discontent when the Kingdom of God arrives in its fullness. And as we heard in our Scripture readings, we see Jesus' disciples discussing the issue of covetousness as paramount. James attributes quarrels and fights, even murder, to coveting what the world has to offer. He goes so far as to say that those who covet worldliness are the enemies of God. James says that the Holy Spirit desires the attention that we give to our own pleasures. God wants our focus – the focus we spend trying to please ourselves.

Paul this morning wrote about the inherent dangers of coveting wealth...but he also describes that the opposite of covetousness is not simply avoiding theft but being content. As he says, "godliness with contentment is great gain." Both Paul and James tell us that the road to contentment is to put our hope in the LORD, not in our possessions, and to fight the good fight of faith – because for many of us, this is where our real battle with sin lies.

As I've studied this subject over the past couple of weeks, I've been convicted on this topic over and over again, and of all the ethical issues we face in the church today, this may be the biggest. I believe it will only grow larger over the coming years as well for reasons I'll explain. If we are to face down the beast of covetousness in our lives, we need to know what and why we covet, why it matters, and why contentment in God is the only way out.

Covetousness is not a new thing. If it was, we wouldn't see it covered so thoroughly in the Scriptures. I think we'll find that *what* we covet today is occasionally different from Jesus' day, but *why* we covet is exactly the same. In our culture, we covet a great number of intangibles – power, success, fame, admiration, even love. But we also covet a tidal wave of material possessions. We pay money to bring ads into our homes which are designed to make us want to buy something! We also crave entertainment. When I talk to other folks my own age or a little younger, it's amazing how much of the conversation becomes about the latest movies, music, TV shows, and computer games. There are a ton of ways we can spend our money and our time.

In my own life, I've really had to nail down what I covet – because if I don't realize it, I'll never do anything about it. I've painfully come to the conclusion that I am too motivated by my own entertainment. But I also know that I have coveted other things...respect and success in the eyes of my peers among them. Sometimes I covet a pulpit with a thousand people listening to me and accepting what I say as the gospel truth. These are areas that I must take with me daily to the cross Christ said I would bear if I would follow Him. And you have your own.

While we all have our own individual things we desire, covetousness traces its path back to what Paul calls "wandering from the faith." He calls us to flee from the love of things and to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. We need to pursue God because the things we buy and cherish and covet are replacements for Him. I'm not saying you can't enjoy a book and see God's messages in it; I'm not saying you can't ever watch a movie or appreciate a good steak or a precision automobile. Many of these things can reflect God's goodness. But often, our pursuit of more stuff is a desperate attempt to fill the hole in our lives that can't be filled by anything else but God.

We try to make ourselves happy, or at least content, with our jobs and our families and our hobbies, but it's never going to work. We are always going to find ourselves dissatisfied with whatever we try to stuff into our lives in place of God. And yet until we turn to Him, we're always going to cram our lives chockfull to try and deaden that pain of knowing we are incomplete, that something huge is missing. In fact, we can even covet activities – we think our lives are meaningful just because every last hour on our calendar is scheduled. But that's just another way to try to avoid dealing with the issue of God.

But why does it matter? Why does God care if I like to collect guitars or DVDs or Hummels? What does God care if I greatly desire things, particularly if I don't take them? I believe that covetousness matters because it is greatly destructive, both when it is carried out to its logical end of theft and when it remains just a matter of the mind. The destruction that happens is both physical and spiritual, and it affects not just individuals but larger communities.

Because of my undergrad work in radio and television communication and journalism, it's a world I know pretty well. And the simple truth is that the media world has fallen apart in the last fifteen years since the expansion of the Internet. The music industry has imploded. Artists who would have sold millions of CDs in previous generations are lucky to sell 100,000 copies. There's more music available due to the Internet than ever before, but you can't make a living at it. That affects Christian musicians just like secular ones. Meanwhile, the film industry has seen a loss of approximately \$5 billion from film piracy – which has led to over 140,000 lost jobs and a total hit on the US economy of \$20 billion. The average person who works on a film makes \$55,000 a year – it's those folks who are hurt by covetousness. And that's just one corner of one industry...how much is it costing us elsewhere?

Now all of this may sound foreign to you. You may not even own a computer, let alone download something that doesn't belong to you. But when it comes down to covetousness, the problem can't just be measured in dollars and cents. It changes our hearts and minds. As Paul put it, "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction." When we really want something, we try to justify it. We say we're owed it; we deserve it. It's our money to do with as we please. When we covet something, we come up with arguments in our own minds as to why we should be able to take whatever it is that we want. We become angry with other people for the things they have. We begin to seethe and call things "unfair." Coveting can even affect us physically. How many times have I overeaten at a buffet because I want to get "my money's worth"? How many of us buy cheap goods made overseas somewhere at someone else's expense so we can feel that we've managed our money well?

Coveting is like a cancer. Cancer takes our own bodies' healthy cells and turns them against us, multiplying them until the body can no longer handle it. Coveting takes our healthy desire for God and perverts it into a desire for things other than God, and that desire grows and grows until it overwhelms us body and soul.

So what's the answer? How do we get free of the cancer of coveting? Through contentedness found only within a relationship with the God of the universe. Friends, if we flee from covetousness, if we flee from all the world wants us to buy into, the only direction left to us will be right into the arms of Jesus. What Jesus offers us is forgiveness, salvation, a home with God for eternity, a place to belong... His offer is so much more fulfilling in the long-term than anything we could possibly purchase or lust after.

So what is godly contentment? It's the ability to say, whatever the circumstance, "I have God, and He is enough." As our Psalm this morning said, "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken." The Psalmist uses the word "alone" twice in two verses. He knows there is no other place he can find peace or shelter, no other place he can rely on. God is it. And yet despite having no other resources, no other strength to rely on, nothing even in himself to count on, he will not be shaken. It is the beautiful scandal of the Gospel – when we realize we have nothing but God, we realize we have far more than we could ever need. We realize that when we carry our cross behind Jesus as He commands us, we actually crucify all the things that burden and enslave us. All the world has for us means nothing without Him, yet with Him, nothing the world offers seems so important anymore.

So what does contentedness look like in the real world? It's being OK with where you are at in life. So you don't have the best job. So you don't have the best car. So you don't have the perfect house. Contentedness says, "I have what God has given me – and I'm grateful." There's a reason we sang the song "Today Is The Day" this morning because it's a song of contentment. I'm casting my cares aside...I'm leaving my doubts behind...knowing that all you have in store for me is good...I won't worry about tomorrow; I'm trusting in what you say. That's contentment! It's knowing that in pain and sorrow, in joy and laughter, hunger and fullness, God is the One who holds our fate, and He loves us without reservation. He loves us enough that Jesus gave Himself for us, lived with us, died with us, so that we could know real love, real contentment. The grass is always greener on His side.

What does this do to our hobbies, our interests, the things that for whatever reason light up our imaginations? I'm not going to promise you that God will just hand them back to you to enjoy. Sometimes He will; sometimes He won't. He knows you better than you know yourself. God knows whether wealth will be something you can give away freely or something that will just enslave you again. He knows whether your pursuits can lead you closer to Him or further away. My very best suggestion is to trust Him with everything. When you realize you own nothing, when you know with Paul that "we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it," suddenly everything we do have becomes a gift.

As we leave this morning, I want us to be honest with ourselves and ask the question – "what is there in my life I can't live without?" And if the answer is something other than God, maybe we need to start turning it over to God. And remember this – God made you, God loves you, and when you are ready to be free of the chains of the things you covet, you will find that God has already broken those bonds through His Son Jesus Christ.