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COVETOUSNESS

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A COMMON YET SUBTLE SIN

S.L. Brengle (1860-1936)

"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's."—Exodus 20:17

There is a sin which a Catholic priest once declared that no one had ever confessed to him—a sin so deadly that the wrath of God comes upon men because of it; a sin so common that probably everybody has at some time been guilty of it; a sin so gross in the sight of God as to be classed with whoremongery, idolatry, murder, and such like; a sin so subtle that men most guilty of it seem to be most unconscious of it; a sin that has led to the ruin of homes, to the doom of cities, the downfall of kings, the overthrow of empires, the collapse of civilizations, the damnation of an apostle, of ministers of the Gospel and of millions of less conspicuous men. Men in the highest and most sacred positions of trust, and enjoying the most unlimited confidence of their fellow-men, have under the spell of this sin wrecked their good names, and have brought shame to their families, and misfortune, want, and woe to their fellows.

When amid the thunderings and lightnings of Mt. Sinai, God gave the ten commandments to Moses, one of the ten was against this sin. When Lot lost all he had in the doom of Sodom and Gomorrah, it was primarily because of this sin. When Nadab and Abihu were suddenly consumed by the fierce fires of God's wrath, at the bottom of their transgression was this sin. When Achan and his household were stoned, it was because of this sin. When Eli and his sons lost the priesthood and died miserably, it was at root because of this sin. When Saul lost his kingdom, it was because this sin had subtly undermined his loyalty to God. When Ahab died and the dogs licked his blood, he was meeting the doom of this sin.

When David fell from heights of God's tender favor and fellowship, and brought shame and confusion upon himself, and incurred God's hot displeasure and life-long trouble, it was because of this sin.

When Elisha's servant, Gehazi, went out from the presence of the prophet smitten with leprosy white as snow, it was because of this sin. When Judas betrayed the Master with a kiss, thus making his name a synonym of everlasting obloquy and bringing, upon himself the death of a dog and a fool, it was because of this sin. When Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead at Peter's feet, they suffered the dread penalty of this sin. When the great war burst forth in 1914, enveloping the earth in its wrathful flame, sweeping away the splendid manhood of the world in storms of steel and rivers of blood, and engulfing the accumulated wealth of ages in a bottomless pit of destruction, the disaster could be traced to the unrestricted and deadly workings of this awful, secret, silent, pitiless sin.

But what is the sin that the Catholic priest never heard mentioned in his confessional-this sin that apostles and priests and shepherds and servants have committed, and upon which the swift, fierce lightnings of God's wrath have fallen- this sin of which everyone at sometime has probably been guilty and yet which is so secret and subtle that those most enthralled by it are most unconscious of it? (It is the sin of Covetousness.

When the herdsmen of Lot and Abraham fell into strife, Abraham, the uncle, to whom God had promised all the land, said to the young man, Lot, his nephew, "Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, we be brethren." Then he bade Lot take any portion of the land which pleased him, and he would be content to take what was left. Lot looked down upon the fat plains of Jordan, and without a thought for his old uncle, to whom he owed all, he drove his herds into the lush pastures of the rich plain, near the markets of opulent Sodom and Gomorrah, while the rough and stony hill country was left to Abraham. But God became more fully than ever the companion and portion of Abraham; while Lot, through his covetousness, was soon so entangled in the life of Sodom that in the doom of the city he lost all he had, barely escaping with his life, and accompanied only by two weak and wilful daughters

At the bottom of Nadab and Abihu's sacrilegious offering of strange fire before the Lord was their coveting of the priestly power and authority of Aaron, and it led to God's swift vindication of Aaron in their awful destruction. When the children of Israel entered the land of promise and the walls of Jericho fell before them, Achan saw gold and garments which he coveted and took to himself, regardless of God's commandment, thereby bringing defeat to Israel, death to his fellow-soldiers, and terrible doom on himself.

Old Eli's sons, unsatisfied with the rich provision made for the priesthood, coveted that which God had reserved for sacrifice, and against protest took what was forbidden for themselves. Besides, despite God's command, they coveted the wives and maidens that came up to worship at God's altar. When soft-hearted old Eli heard about their sin, he only feebly reproved them; consequently, God's wrath swiftly followed, with its doom of death and the loss of the priesthood.

It was Saul's coveting the goodwill of the people, rather than the favor of God, that led to his disobedience and loss of the kingdom.

Among all Ahab's other reeking iniquities, it was his covetousness-leading him to destroy Naboth and steal his vineyard-that brought down upon him God's sleepless judgment, till he died in battle and dogs licked up his blood.

David coveted Bathsheba, the wife of another man, and to this day blasphemers sneer and God is reproached, while David only escaped the doom which falls upon those who are guilty of this sin by his humble confession, deep repentance, and brokenness of heart. But he could not escape endless shame, sorrow, and trouble.

Gehazi cast longing eyes upon the gold, silver, and rare changes of garments which Naaman pressed upon Elisha, the prophet, out of gratitude for his cleansing in Jordan, and which Elisha refused. But, blinded by the glitter of gold, and steeped in covetousness, Gehazi had no heart and no understanding for the austere self-denial of the fine old prophet, and he said to himself, "As the Lord liveth, I will run after him and take somewhat of him!" And run he did, and "somewhat" he received! Then, to hide his sin, he lied to Elisha; but the old seer's eyes were like seraph's eyes-they saw-and he said to the covetous, lying Gehazi, "Went not my heart with thee when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants? The leprosy, therefore, of Naaman shall cleave unto thee and unto thy seed for ever! And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow."

Covetousness ruled the stony, ashen heart of Judas, and for thirty pieces of silver he betrayed the Master!

Covetousness possessed the selfish hearts of Ananias and Sapphira; they wanted the praise and honor of utmost sacrifice and generosity while secretly holding on to their gold. And God smote them dead!

As we study the history and Biblical examples of this sin of covetousness, we see the deep meaning and truth of Paul's words to Timothy, "They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil." (1 Tim 6:9,10a)

This sin led to ingratitude toward his uncle, and neighborly association with vile sinners in Lot; to envy and jealousy and sacrilege in Nadab and Abihu; to disobedience in Saul; to sacrilege and licentiousness in Eli's sons; to adultery and murder in David; to brazen robbery in Ahab; to greed and lying in Gehazi; to the betrayal of the innocent Christ with an impudent kiss in Judas; to bold lying to the Holy Ghost in Ananias and Sapphira. Truly, from its poisonous root has sprung up the deadly upas-tree of all evil, and upon it in manifold ways has been outpoured the wrath of God, showing His holy hatred and abhorrence of it.

A close study of the awful ravages of this sin in its manifold workings would show that again and again it has undermined thrones and led to the downfall of empires: that it has rotted away the strong foundations of chastity and honesty and truth and good-will in whole peoples, ending in the collapse of civilizations. (editor's note: Look at our society today.)

Once its workings begin in a human heart there is no end to the ruin and woe it may bring about in that soul, and then in the lives of others. There is no height of honor and holiness from which it may not pull men down. There is no depth of pitiless selfishness, lying evasion, brazen effrontery, and self-deception, into which it may not plunge men. When proclaiming the Ten Commandments from the flaming mount, God reserved the last to hurl at this sin, not because it was least of all the sins forbidden, but rather because it was a pregnant mother of them all, an instigator and ally of all evil.

Covetousness is a sin that reaches out for men of every age. In some of its forms it makes its most successful assaults upon men well advanced in years. A man in ardent devotion to Christ may successfully resist it in his youth, and yet fall before it when his head is crowned with honors and white with the snows of many winters. The fear of want in old age, the natural desire to provide for his children and loved ones, may silently, secretly lead him into the deadly embrace of this serpent-like sin; may cause shipwreck of his honor, his faith, his "first love," his simplicity in Christ, his unselfish devotion to the interests of the Lord and the souls of his fellow-men, and thus may bring about his final rejection in that day when the secrets of men's hearts shall be revealed and their works made manifest by fire.

How may men avoid this deadly, secret, subtle sin? There is but one way; that is, by following Jesus in daily, resolute self-denial, by watchfulness and prayer, by "walking in the light as He is in the light," by openness of heart, by humility of mind, by utter surrender to the Holy Spirit, by counting all things loss for Christ, as did Paul; by learning and not forgetting that "godliness, with contentment, is great gain," by seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, by joyfully trusting Christ and Him alone for all things.

COVETOUSNESS

Arthur W. Pink

Hebrews 13:5

In this chapter of Hebrews the apostle makes a practical application of the theme of the epistle. Having set forth at length the amazing grace of God toward His believing people by the provision He has made for them in the Mediator and Surety of the covenant, having shown that they now have in Christ the substance of all that was shadowed forth in the ceremonial law, the tabernacle, and the priesthood of Israel, we now have pressed upon us the responsibilities and obligations which devolve upon those who are the favoured recipients of those spiritual blessings. First, that which is fundamental to the

discharge of all Christian duties is exhorted unto: the continuance of brotherly love (v. 1). Second, instances are given in which this chief spiritual grace is to be exemplified: in Christian hospitality (v. 2), and in compassion for the afflicted (v. 3). Third, prohibitions are made against the two most radical lusts of fallen nature: moral uncleanness (v. 4) and covetousness (v. 5), for the indulgence of these is fatal to the exercise of brotherly love.

Having in our last article dealt at length with the merciful provision which God has made for the avoidance of moral uncleanness-the ordinance of marriage-we now turn to the second great sin which is here dehorted against, namely, covetousness. "Let your conversation be without covetousness, and be content with such things as ye have" (v. 5). Here is an evil and its remedy set before us side by side, as was the case in the previous verse, though there the remedy is given before that which it counteracts. We will follow the order of our present text and consider first the vice which is here forbidden, before we contemplate the virtue which is enjoined: yet it will be helpful to keep them both in mind, for the latter casts light upon the former, enabling us to determine its exact nature as nothing else will.

"Let your conversation be without covetousness." The Greek word which is here rendered "covetousness" is literally "lover of silver." and the R.V. renders our text "Be ye free from the love of money." Now while it be true that the love of money or worldly possessions is one of the principal forms of covetousness, yet we are satisfied that the translation of the A.V. is to be preferred here. The scope of the Greek verb is much wider than a lusting after material riches. This appears from the only other verse in the N.T. where this word occurs, namely, 1 Tim. 3:3, in a passage which describes the qualifications of a bishop: "Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous." The very fact that a previous clause specifies "not greedy of filthy lucre" makes it clear that "not covetous" includes more than "not a lover of money."

A comment or two also requires to be made upon the term "conversation." This word is limited to-day unto our speech with one another, but three hundred years ago, when the A.V. was made, it had a much more comprehensive meaning. Its latitude can be gathered from its employment in the Scriptures. For example, in 1 Pet. 3:2 we read, "while they behold your chaste conversation:" note "behold" was not "hear!" The term then has reference to behaviour or deportment: "But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation" (1 Pet. 1:15). It is not to be restricted to that which is external, but includes both character and conduct. The Syriac renders our word "mind," probably because both covetousness and contentment are mental states. "Let your conversation be as it becometh the Gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27): this obviously means, Let your affections and actions correspond to the revelation of Divine grace you have received; conduct yourself in such a manner that those around will be impressed by the principles, motives, and sentiments which govern you.

So it is here in our text: let not covetousness rule your heart nor regulate your life. But exactly what is "covetousness"? It is the opposite of contentment, a being dissatisfied with our present lot and portion. It is an over-eager desire for the things of this world. It is a lusting after what God has forbidden or withheld from us, for we may crave, wrongly, after things which are not evil or injurious in themselves. All abnormal and irregular desires, all unholy and inordinate thoughts and affections, are comprehended by this term. To covet is to think upon and hanker after anything which my acquirement of would result in injury to my neighbor. "We may desire that part of a man's property which he is inclined to dispose of, if we mean to obtain it on equitable terms; but when he chooses to keep, we must not covet. The poor man may desire moderate relief from the rich, but he must not covet his affluence, or repine even though he does not relieve him" (Thos. Scott).

Now some sins are more easily detected than others, and for the most part condemned by those professing godliness. But covetousness is only too often winked at, and some covetous persons are regarded as very respectable people. Many professing Christians look upon covetousness as quite a trifling matter, while the world applauds it as legitimate ambition, as business shrewdness, as prudence, etc. All sorts of excuses are made for this sin and plausible presences argued in its favour. It is indeed a very subtle sin, which few are conscious of. In one of his sermons Spurgeon mentions a prominent man who had a great many people come to him to make confession, and this man observed that while different ones acknowledged all sorts of outrageous crimes, he never had one who confessed to covetousness. Few suspect that this is one of the prevailing iniquities of their hearts, rather are they inclined to regard this vice as a virtue.

But the Holy Scriptures are very explicit on this subject. The Divine law expressly declares, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbour's" (Ex. 20:17). "The covetous, whom the Lord abhorreth" (Psa. 10:3). To His

disciples Christ said, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15). The votaries of Mammon are linked with "drunkards and adulterers," and such are excluded from the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10). The covetous are branded with the most detestable character of idolaters (Col. 3:5)-no doubt this is because they who are ruled by this lust adore their gold and put their trust in it, making a god of it. How we need to pray, "Incline mine heart unto Thy testimonies, and not to covetousness" (Psa. 119:36).

God's Word also sets before us some fearfully solemn examples of the judgments which fell upon covetous souls. The fall of our first parents originated in covetousness, lusting after that which God had forbidden. Thus the very frontispiece of Holy Writ exhibits the frightfulness of this sin. See what covetousness did for Balaam: he "loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Pet. 2:15)- the honours and wealth which Balak promised were too attractive for him to resist. See what covetousness did for Achan, who lusted after the forbidden silver and gold: he and his whole family were stoned to death (Josh. 7). Look at Gehazi: lusting after the money his master had refused, and in consequence, he and his seed were smitten with leprosy (2 Kings 5). Consider the awful case of Judas, who for thirty pieces of silver sold the Lord of glory. Remember the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). In view of these warnings shall we call this worst of iniquities "a little sin"? Surely it is something to be trembled at!

Covetousness is an inordinate desire of the heart after the creature; which is a fruit of man's apostacy from the Lord. No longer finding in God the supreme object of his soul's delight and confidence, fallen man loves and trusts in the creature (mere things) rather than the Creator. This takes on many forms: men lust after honours, wealth, pleasures, knowledge, for Scripture speaks of "the desires of the flesh and of the mind" (Eph. 2:3), and of "filthiness of the flesh and spirit" (2 Cor. 7:1). It is the very nature of the depraved heart to hanker after that which God has forbidden and to crave after what is evil, though this spirit may be developed more strongly in some than in others; at any rate, a larger measure of restraining grace is granted to one than to another. These irregular desires and inordinate thoughts are the firstborn of our corrupt nature, the first risings of indwelling sin, the beginnings of all transgressions committed by us.

"Thou shalt not covet" (Ex. 20:17). "The commandment requires moderation in respect of all worldly goods, submission to God, acquiescence in His will, love to His commandments, and a reliance on Him for the daily supply of all our wants as He sees good. This is right and reasonable, fit for God to command and profitable for man to obey, the very temper and felicity of Heaven itself. But it is so contrary to the desires of our hearts by nature, and so superior to the actual attainments of the best Christians on earth, that it is very difficult to persuade them that God requires such perfection, and still more difficult to satisfy them that it is indispensable to the happiness of rational creatures, and most difficult of all to convince them that everything inconsistent with this or short of it is sin; that it deserves the wrath of God, and cannot be taken away, except by the mercy of God through the atonement of Christ" (T. Scott).

The most common form of this sin is, of course, the love of money, the lusting after more and more of material riches. This is evident in getting, keeping, and spending. First, in getting. To acquire wealth becomes the dominant passion of the soul. An insatiable greed possesses the heart. This exists in varying degrees in different persons, and is demonstrated in numerous ways. That we may be quite practical let us mention one or two. Often this is manifested in a greedy and grasping effort after inequitable profits and by paying an unjustly small wage to employees, the chief design of its perpetrators being to amass fortunes for their descendants. Yet often these very men hold prominent positions in the churches and "make long prayers," while devouring widows' houses and grinding the face of the poor. Alas, how the Gospel is dishonoured and the sanctuary defiled by such sanctimonious wretches.

Again. Recently we read a faithful article wherein the writer took to task the lies and deceptions practiced by many shopkeepers and their assistants in palming off upon the public various forms of merchandise by misrepresenting their quality and value; the writer concluding with a solemn emphasis upon "all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone" (Rev. 21:8). As he finished reading the same, this writer asked himself the question, And how far is a greedy and grasping public to blame? Who is largely responsible for this commercial dishonesty? Who tempt the tradesmen to mark their wares as "great bargains," "prices much reduced?" Is it not the covetous purchasers? How many to-day are possessed with an insatiable craving after "bargains," buying things "cheap," without any conscientious consideration of the real worth of the article: it is that which fosters so much fraud. Let the Christian buy only what he needs, and when he needs it, and so far as possible only from upright traders, and then he will be more willing to pay according to the value received.

Second, covetousness evidences itself in keeping. There is a miserliness which clings to money as a drowning man to a log. There is a hoarding up for self which is entirely reprehensible. "There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother; yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail" (Eccl. 4:8). Yes, there are those who are utterly unconcerned about their eternal interests, and labour day in and day out, year after year, in order to add to what they have already accumulated, and who begrudge purchasing for themselves the bare necessities of life. They continue to amass money utterly regardless of Christ's cause on earth or the poor and needy among their fellow-men. There are still those the language of whose actions is, "I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years: take shine ease; eat, drink, be merry" (Luke 12:18, 19).

Third, covetousness also manifests itself in spending. If there be those who are niggardly, there are others who are wastrels. If there be those who condemn the miser for his stinginess, often they are guilty in turn of wreckless prodigality. That which ought to be saved for a rainy day, is used to gratify a desire which covets some unnecessary object. But let us not be misunderstood on these points. Neither the possession nor the retention of wealth is wrong in itself, providing it be acquired honestly and preserved with a justifiable motive. God is the One who "giveth thee power to get wealth" (Deut. 8:18), and therefore is His goodness to be acknowledged when He is pleased to prosper us in basket and in store. Yet even then we need the exhortation, "If riches increase, set not thine heart upon them" (Psa. 62 :10).

"Not slothful in business" (Rom. 12:11) is a Divine exhortation. So also there is a prudence and thrift which is legitimate, as is clear from, "There is that withholdeth more than meet, but it tendeth to poverty" (Prov. 11:24). So also it is a bounden duty to make provision for those who are dependent upon us: "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5:8). It is easy to swing to the opposite extreme and become fanatical, and under the guise of trusting God, tempt Him. To lay up for a rainy day is quite permissible: see Prov. 6:6-8. Neither idleness nor extravagance are to be condoned. Those who through indolence or prodigality waste their substance and fail in business cannot be too severely censured, for they not only impoverish themselves but injure others, becoming the pests of society and a public burden.

Yet how difficult it is to strike the happy mean: to be provident without being prodigal, to be "not slothful in business" and yet not bury ourselves in it, to be thrifty without being miserly, to use this world and yet not abuse it. How appropriate is the prayer, "Remove from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny Thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain" (Prov. 30:8, 9). Rom. 7:7 shows that it is only as the Spirit applies the Law in power to the conscience that we are taught to see the evil and feel the danger of covetousness; as, at the same time, it serves to check an avaricious disposition and curb inordinate fondness for the creature. That which most effectually strikes at our innate selfishness is the love of God shed abroad in the heart. A generous heart and a liberal hand should ever characterize the Christian.

A few words next upon the heinousness of covetousness. This evil lust blinds the understanding and corrupts the judgment, so that it regards light as darkness, and darkness as light. "If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence; if I rejoiced because my wealth was great and because mine hand had gotten much . . . This also was an iniquity to be punished by the judge, for I should have denied the God that is above" (Job 31:24, 25, 28)-how little this is realized by the guilty one! It is an insatiable lust, for when covetousness rules, the heart is never satisfied: "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase" (Eccl. 5:10). It is a devouring sin: "the deceitfulness of riches choke the word" (Matt. 13:22).

So terrible is this sin and so great is its power that, one who is governed by it will trample upon the claims of justice, as Ahab did in seizing the vineyard of Naboth (1 Kings 21); he will disregard the call of charity, as David did in taking the wife of Uriah (2 Sam. 11); he will stoop to the most fearful lies, as did Ananias and Sapphira; he will defy the express commandment of God, as Achan did; he will sell Christ, as Judas did. This is the mother sin, for "the love of money is the root of all evil." It is a gnawing and fatal sin: "But they that will be (are determined to be) rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition . . . which while some have coveted after they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Tim. 6:9, 10).

It is the working of this evil lust which lies at the root of very much of the fearful Sabbath-desecration that is now so rife. It is the greed of gold which causes the railways to run special excursions on the Lord's day, tempting people to leave the

city for the country-side or the sea-beach. It is the lure of lucre which prompts thousands of shops to be open seven days in the week. It is the love of money which lies behind the Sunday editions of the newspaper. How the nations of Christendom are heaping up to themselves "wrath against the Day of Wrath!" God will not be mocked with impunity. Those who believe the Scriptures must perforce expect that soon a far worse war than the last is likely to be sent as a scourge from Heaven upon the present Sabbath profaners.

It was the spirit of covetousness which prompted Israel of old to disregard the fourth commandment. "In those days saw I in Jerusalem some treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold in the Sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem" (Neh. 13:15, 16). Because of their Sabbath profanation, the sore judgment of God fell upon the nation. "Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil is this that ye do, and profane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath" (Neh. 13:17, 18): "Hallow My Sabbaths and they shall be a sign between Me and you, that ye may know that I am the Lord your God. Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against Me: they walked not in My statutes neither kept My judgments to do them, which if a man do, he shall even live in them: they polluted My Sabbaths: then I said, I will pour out My fury upon them" (Ezek. 20:20, 21).

Thus, not only is covetousness a fearful sin in itself, but it is also the prolific mother of other evils. In the poor, it works envy, discontent, and fraud; in the rich, pride, luxury, and avarice. This vile lust unfits for the performing of holy duties, preventing the exercise of those graces which are necessary thereto. It exposes to manifold temptations, whereby we are rendered an easy prey to many spiritual enemies. The more we yield to this evil spirit, the more do we conduct ourselves as though we desired our portion in this world, and look no further than present things, contrary to "while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen" (2 Cor. 4:18). It tends to cast contempt on the mercies which are ours and quenches the spirit of thanksgiving. It turns the heart away from God: "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23).

Let us now go deeper and solemnly observe the comprehensiveness of God's searching law, "Thou shalt not covet" (Ex. 20:17). Light is cast upon those words by, "I had not known sin, but by the Law; for I had not known lust ('concupiscence,' margin) except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet or "lust" (Rom. 7:7)-"concupiscence" is an evil desire, an inordinate affection, a secret lusting after something. What the apostle means is, I had never discovered my inward depravity unless the Spirit had enlightened my understanding, convicted my conscience, and made me feel the corruptions of my heart. Man ever looks on the outward appearance-and as a Pharisee of the Pharisees Paul's actions fully conformed to the Law-but when the Spirit quickens a soul, he is made to realize that God requires "Truth in the inward parts" (Psa. 51:6) and cries "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psa. 51:10).

"Thou shalt not covet." That which is here forbidden is concupiscence, or those imaginations, thoughts, and desires, which precede the consent of the will. Herein we may perceive the exalted holiness of the Divine Law-far transcending all human codes- requiring inward purity. Herein, too, we may recognize one of the fundamental errors of Romanists, who, following the Pelagians, deny that these lustings are sinful until they are yielded to, and who affirm that evil imaginations only become sinful when the mind definitely assents to them. But the holy Law of God condemns that which instigates unto what is forbidden, condemns that which inclines toward what is unholy, and denounces that which inflames with cupidity. All irregular desires are forbidden. Corrupt imaginations and unlawful inclinations that precede the consent of the will are evil, being the seeds of all other sins.

Again we say, Herein God's Law differs from and is immeasurably superior to all of man's laws, for it takes note of and prohibits all the hidden desires and secret lustings of the heart. It is this tenth commandment which, above all others, discovers unto us our depravity and shows how very far short we come of that perfection which the Law requires. There is first an evil thought in the mind causing us to think of something which is not ours. This is followed by a longing after or wishing for it. There is then an inward delight by way of anticipating the pleasure that object will give; and then, unless restraining grace intervenes, the outward act of sin is committed-see James 1:14, 15. The first evil thought is involuntary, due to the mind's being turned from good to evil, even though that evil be simply lusting after a new but unnecessary hat! The longing is caused by the heart's being enticed by the delight promised. Then the consent of the will is gained, and the mind plans how to gain the coveted object.

This concupiscence or evil lusting of the heart is called "the law of sin which is in my members" (Rom. 7:23). It is what the older theologians term "original sin," being the fountain of evil within, corrupting all our faculties. Discontent with our lot, envy of our neighbours, yea, even the very "thought of foolishness is SIN" (Prov. 24:9). How high is the standard set before us: "Let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour; and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, saith the Lord" (Zech. 8:17). Does the third commandment interdict any blasphemous oath upon the lips? then the tenth prohibits any risings of the heart against God. Does the fourth commandment interdict all unnecessary work on the Sabbath? then the tenth condemns our saying "what a weariness is it." Does the eighth commandment interdict every act of theft? then the tenth prohibits our desiring anything which is our neighbour's.

But it is not until after a person is regenerate that he takes notice of the inward motions of sin and takes cognizance of the state of his heart. Then Satan will seek to persuade that he is not responsible for involuntary thoughts (which come unbidden), that evil desires are beyond our control-infirmities which are excusable. But God says to him "Keep thine heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23), and makes him realize that every lusting after what He has forbidden or withheld is a species of self-will. Therefore we are accountable to judge the first inclination toward evil and resist the very earliest solicitations. The fact that we discover so much within that is contrary to God's holy requirements should deeply humble us, and cause us to live more and more out of self and upon Christ.

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THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

Marcus Dods

Marcus Dods, a Free Church of Scotland minister, labored for many years in Glasgow and then filled the chair of New Testament Theology in Edinburgh University. He gives rather an unusual aspect to this story of the rich fool in Luke 12 and the Lord's warning words about covetousness. With profit we can glean from this profound student of the Bible.

Our Lord had been assuring His disciples that if they were brought into court, the Holy Ghost would teach them what to say. There is a man in the crowd to whom, at last, the words of Jesus begin to seem practical; courts, law-suits, inheritances, were the staple of his thoughts, and the familiar words made him prick his ears. This ability to speak in courts is the very thing he has been seeking. If Jesus has it, He will possibly be good enough to use it for him, and so he will get his law gratis, as well as recover his share in the inheritance. This is a delightful prospect, too good an opportunity to let slip. And so, utterly blind to the kind of interests our Lord had at heart, utterly regardless of the crowd, possessed with the one thought that for months and years had consumed him, and seeing only that Jesus had great wisdom and justice, a remarkable faculty of putting things in their right light, and an authoritative manner, which surely not even his brother could resist, he blurts out-"Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me."

....The egotism of worldliness was never exhibited in a more barefaced, naked, shameless form. Here had this man, through all our Lord's conversation, been thinking his own worldly thoughts; what he gathers from all our Lord has been saying is, that He would make a good lawyer; and the best thing he can imagine that Christ, with His felt authority and goodness, can do for him, is to help him to a better income. He is sensible of Christ's power; if he was informed that He had come down from Heaven, he would not be disposed to question it. What is it then, as he stands in presence of this highest Beneficence, that he will claim? What is it, now that he finds his opportunity, that he will have? That half acre his brother has kept him out of? So are men judged by their wishes and cravings.

...."Speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance." But covetousness and lunacy are always so nearly allied that this man can scarcely be considered as showing any special signs of lunacy. We can all detect in ourselves the germs of his character. We know how possible it is to retain a grasping disposition and avaricious purposes through very solemn converse with things spiritual. We know what it is to let some one important affair take such possession of our thoughts that, for a time, God and all spiritual things are as though they were not.....

What a contrast did these two central figures of the crowd present! This man in whom no response whatever is found to anything spiritual, who can stand and listen to God Incarnate and be conscious of no new desires, no new world opening to his hope-this poor, shrunken creature on the one hand, and on the other Jesus, in Whose eye no answering sparkle met the glitter of gold, Who could listen to talk about disputed successions and undivided properties without the smallest interest, Who could not be tempted to assume authority in affairs where the arbiter would not be forgotten. What our Lord continued throughout His life to do, He did here-refused to interfere in civil matters, repelling indignantly the idea that He was to be used as a petty magistrate.... Our Lord would not spend a word in composing that fraternal difference, but he would spend all the force of His teaching on extirpating the cause of the difference. "Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?" He said, but also, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness." If our Lord, Who saw in every case what was right to be done, refused to intermeddle, how much more should we limit ourselves to what is our own sphere, who neither clearly and wholly understand, nor are wise to act....

It was the shock produced by this man's naive display of his absorbing worldliness which made our Lord at once turn to the crowd with the words, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things he possesseth." This, then, is pointed out as the great snare of covetousness, that it tends to make a man identify himself with his possessions and rate himself by them. This is what our Lord here lays His finger on, as being especially disastrous in this vice; it blinds a man to the fact that he remains forever distinct from his possessions; that he is one thing, his possessions another; that he and they cannot be amalgamated, but must remain separate in essence and in destiny.

That covetousness has this tendency everyone knows. The man who values himself for what he has, and not for what he is, the man who fancies himself great because his possessions are great, is one of the most familiar objects of ridicule. . . . A man is fallen very low indeed, if he is not at all concerned to know that he is making any advance one way or another. Now, men can very soon learn the art of measuring their progress, not by themselves, or their own personal growth, not by any rightness of character and real internal acquisition, but by mere outward, material gain. They are content with some little glows of satisfaction that they are rising in the world, that they are able this year to command some luxuries that were last year beyond their reach, and especially that this actual thing, money, has increased in their hands. This is the way we practically come to measure ourselves by what we have, and to think that our life consists in the abundance of the things we possess.

....Our Lord, therefore, presents to our view a man who has abundant, superabundant possessions, but has no life left. He has laid up goods in abundance and reckoned on life in abundance, a long, full, lively life. He forgot the distinction, but it was made nevertheless. He is shown to us separate from his possessions, and transferred to a sphere where, like old world coins, their value is unknown and they can neither be accounted, used, nor enjoyed.

....Serious-minded men, who engage in business not for the mere excitement and gain of it, walk in God's presence, and bear in mind that the silver and the gold are His, that promotion cometh not from the north or south by the wind that happens to be blowing, and are therefore ever ready to say, "What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me?" Can anything be more pitiable than the man who stands at his counting-house door and forbids God's entrance while his balance is being struck, who does not care that God should know how much he made last year, but goes and prays that this God would give him success this year? Is it not astonishing how religious men who profess to live for God should so carefully keep Him from interfering in their money matters, that is, in those matters round which their life really revolves?...

In the case of this rich man certainly his blindness to the source of his wealth and the bad use he made of it did hang together. He missed the opportunity of being God's almoner, of dispensing God's bounty to the needy. He did not recognise that it was the Lord Who gave, and therefore it was not the Lord's poor who got. The goods are his goods-he can't get past that; he may do what he likes with them, he cannot see that there is any other vote or voice in the matter. In what sense the fulness of the world is God's he has no mind to consider. His barns are bursting, he has more wealth than he knows what to do with; but one thing is certain, it must all be spent on himself. You would suppose he had never seen a hungry child in his life; you would suppose he had never met a beggar, or seen a blind man or a cripple in his market town. "Where shall I bestow my goods?" This was his difficulty, and yet he had the world before him, a world filled with want, abundant in misery, rich in cases of need....Among all the investments he had heard and thought of, there was one prospectus he had apparently not seen, that to which God has put His name. "He that giveth to the poor, lendeth to the Lord." He did not apprehend that their bare and empty homes would be better houses of investment than his own locked and useless barns.

....What this Parable draws attention to is the vanity, the insecurity of worldly and selfish expectations. The man had one view of the future; God another. The man was saying, "Thou hast much goods laid up for many years." God was saying, "Not another night shall you possess a single bushel." What a satire is here upon man! Truly every man walketh in a vain show; he heapeth up riches and knoweth not who shall gather them. He builds his house and purposes to live and see good days, but a voice falls from Heaven, "Thou misreckoning man, the house may be built, but there will be no man to inhabit it."

This is God's judgement: "Thou fool."

"So is he that layeth up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." So, that is, equally senseless and in an equally precarious position. But how many does this judgement hit? Yet not all; for some, on finding unexpected means coming into their hands, would have said within themselves, "This is delightful, this will enable me to provide for the needy relative, this will at last put me in a position to make up for loss I unwittingly occasioned. This will precisely fit the wants of this or that benevolent institution that I know makes admirable use of its funds. God identifies Himself with all that is needy on earth, and spending treasure for the needy is spending treasure on God.

And in so spending we become rich towards God, are provided for so far as our outlook Godwards is concerned. How is it then with us? Suppose all earthly possessions were suddenly to drop from about you, as they one day will, what would you have left? Would you then be rich or poor? Would the wants you would then begin to feel be amply provided for? . . .What have I towards God? What that is certain to increase the nearer I go to Him? Am I so joined to Him that I can say, "I am persuaded that neither life nor death, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord?"

A CAUTION AGAINST COVETOUSNESS

Charles Simeon (1758-1836)

"And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness."—Luke 12:15

The instructions which our Lord conveyed to his Disciples almost always arose out of something that was immediately before him; so attentive was he to improve every occasion for their good. This was fraught with many advantages; for it tended to impress every truth more forcibly on their minds, and to shew them how to render all events subservient to their own spiritual welfare. It was a trifling circumstance, which of itself did not seem to afford any particular occasion for remark, that gave rise to the discourse before us. A man who had been listening to him for some time, apprehending that, as he spake with such authority, he could easily prevail to settle a point in dispute between his brother and himself, requested his interposition; "Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me." But our Lord, seeing that the man was more intent on his temporal than on his spiritual advancement, not only declined the office, as not being within his commission, but began to caution his Disciples against that covetousness, of which they now saw so striking an example.

A caution so solemnly given to them, cannot but deserve the attention of his followers in every age; and I pray God that the importance of it may be felt by every one of us, whilst we shew,

I. How we may know whether we are under the influence of this evil principle-

It is not by overt acts of dishonesty merely that we are to judge of this, but by the workings of our hearts in reference to the things of this world. We may judge of it,

1. From the manner in which we seek them

Earthly things may certainly be desired, provided that desire be regulated by the necessities of our nature, and subordinated to the will of our heavenly Father. But if we desire them for themselves, or in an undue degree, then immediately are we guilty of that very sin which is reprov'd in our text. If we desire them for themselves, we shew that we think there is some inherent good in them: whereas they are altogether worthless, except as far as they are necessary for our support, and for the strengthening of our bodies to serve the Lord. All beyond mere food and raiment is an empty bubble. To invest earthly things with any inherent excellency, is to put them in the place of God, and to make idols of them: moreover, if our thoughts run out after them more than after God and heavenly things, if the pursuit of them be more delightful to us than the exercises of devotion, and, above all, if we will violate the dictates of conscience, or neglect spiritual duties in order to advance our temporal interest, what is this but covetousness? Can any one doubt whether such a preference to earthly things be sinful? Suppose, for instance, that any man follows an unlawful trade, or a lawful trade in an unlawful way, acquiring his gains from sources which he would be ashamed to confess, and afraid to have discovered; is he not under the influence of covetousness? Does he not prefer money before a good conscience, and the acquisition of wealth before the approbation of his God? Is this a "setting of his affections on things above, and not on the things on the earth?" Hear what an inspired Apostle speaks respecting the criminality and danger of such desires: "Many walk, of whom I have told you often, and tell you now even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, because they mind earthly things." (Phil 3:18,19) It is not every degree of attention to earthly things that he condemns; but such a desire after them as is inordinate, and such a pursuit of them as militates against the welfare of the soul: and, whatever we may call it, God calls it covetousness, and declares it to be idolatry. (Col 3:5)

2. From the manner in which we enjoy them

As all desire after them is not prohibited, so neither is all enjoyment of them; for "God hath given us all things richly to enjoy." But what if we feel complacency in the idea of wealth, and place a confidence in it as a barrier against the calamities of life; Is not this the very sin against which the Prophet Habakkuk denounces a most awful woe? "Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil." (Hab 2:9) It is, in truth, to act the part of the Rich Fool in the Gospel, and to say, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, eat, drink, and be merry?" We are very apt to imagine that the satisfaction which we take in the contemplation of our wealth, is nothing but an expression of thankfulness to God: but it is, for the most part, a "glorying in riches" (which is expressly forbidden) (Jer 9:23); and a "saying to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence." The sentiments of Job on this head were far more correct than those of the generality even of enlightened Christians: "If," says he, "I rejoiced because my wealth was great, and because mine hand had gotten much, this were an iniquity to be punished by the Judge; for then I should have denied the God that is above." (Job 31:25,28) If it be asked, How such a construction can reasonably be put on a sensation of the soul, which appears both innocent and praiseworthy? I answer, That God is the true and only Rest of the soul (Psa 116:7); and that, in proportion as we look to the creature for comfort or support, our hearts of necessity depart from him (Jer 17:5). To be the one source of happiness to his creatures, is his prerogative; and his glory he will not give to another: for "the Lord our God is a jealous God."

3. From the manner in which we support the loss of them

Christianity is far from inculcating a stoical apathy, or rendering us strangers to the common feelings of mankind: but it gives us a principle, which is able to support us under trials, and to fill us with joy in the midst of tribulations. In a word, it presents us with a view of God as our God, and shews us, that nothing in this world can either add to, or take from, the happiness of him who has so rich a portion. This is the principle which enabled Job, under the loss of all his worldly possessions, to say, "The Lord gave, and the Lord taketh away: blessed be the name of the Lord." Now the want of this resignation argues an undue value for the things of this world. If, under an apprehension of some loss, we are filled with anxiety, so as to be quite unfitted for an attention to our spiritual concerns; if, on having sustained that loss, we give way to vexation and grief, instead of rejoicing that we have in God an all-sufficient portion; do we not then in effect say, like Micah, when he had lost his idols, "They have taken away my gods, and what have I more?" Assuredly this is an undeniable mark of covetousness: indeed, God himself puts this construction upon it: "Let your conversation be without covetousness, and be content with such things as ye have." (Heb 13:5) When we are truly delivered from this evil principle, we shall be able to say with the Apostle, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content: I know both how to be abased, and how to abound; every where and in all things I am instructed, both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need." (Phil 4:11,12)

Our next inquiry must be,

II. Why our Lord so earnestly guards us against it-

The terms in which he expresses the caution, are exceeding strong; "Take heed, and beware." But there is abundant occasion for such earnestness; for covetousness is,

1. A common principle

The man who came to desire our Lord's interposition, seems not to have had the smallest idea that he was actuated by this unworthy principle; and probably would have complained of a want of charity in any one who should have imputed it to him. And so it is at this time. However ready we may be to notice it in others, we all overlook it in ourselves, and cloke it by the name of industry or prudential care; so that, if we were to give credit to every man's account of himself, we should not find this principle in the world. But it is deeply rooted in the heart of man (Mark 7:21), and as naturally adheres to the soul as the members to the body (Col 3:5). Even good people still feel its existence and operation within them. Who has not to lament, that in his intercourse with the world he feels somewhat of an undue bias at times, inclining him to lean towards his own interests, and to decide a doubtful point in his own favour? We do not say, that a good man will indulge this principle, but that he will feel it; and that he will find within himself a necessity of being much upon his guard, to prevent it from warping his judgment and influencing his conduct. If this then be the case with respect to those who are crucified to the world, much more must it be so with those who are yet carnal and unrenewed.

2. A delusive principle

We are apt to think that earthly things will make us happy: but our Lord tells us, in the words immediately following our text, that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he possesseth." The truth is, that man's happiness is altogether independent of earthly things. Hear how the Prophet Habakkuk speaks on this subject: "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation." (Hab 3:17,18) This clearly proves, that, however destitute we may be of all earthly comforts, our hearts may overflow with peace and joy: "we may be sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing, having nothing, and yet possessing all things." On the other hand, it is certain that a man may possess all that the world can give him, and yet be miserable; or, as Job expresses it, "In the midst of his sufficiency he may be in straits." (Job 20:22) How often do we see persons, after attaining more than they had ever expected or desired, far less happy than they were at the commencement of their career! We may appeal to the experience of all, whether the increase of their happiness have kept pace with the augmentation of their wealth? We are well assured, that the more sanguine any person's expectations of happiness are from the acquisition of wealth, the greater will his disappointments be; and that every human being must sooner or later confess with Solomon, that all below the sun is "vanity and vexation of spirit."

3. A debasing principle

It is worthy of observation, that the word 'lucre' occurs but four times in the New Testament, and every time has the term 'filthy' annexed to it. Nor is this without reason; for covetousness defiles and debases the soul as much as any principle of our fallen nature. Wherever it exists, it eats out every good principle, and calls forth and strengthens every bad principle, in our fallen nature. How feeble are the operations of honour, friendship, love, compassion, when covetousness has gained an ascendant in the heart! On the other hand, what injustice, falsehood, wrath, and malice will not this horrid principle produce! Well may it be said, "The love of money is the root of all evil;" for there is scarcely an evil in the world which may not arise from it. The opposition between this principle and every Christian virtue, is strongly intimated in the advice given by St. Paul to Timothy (1 Tim 6:10,11) and the utter abhorrence in which it is held by God, is marked (Psa 10:3), yea marked with an emphasis not exceeded in any part of the sacred volume: "An heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children." (2 Pet 2:14) O that we were all duly sensible of its hatefulness and baseness!

4. A destructive principle

See it, in whomsoever it prevails, how it militates against the welfare of the soul, and destroys its eternal interests. The Rich Youth, in despite of all his amiableness, renounced all hope in Christ, rather than he would part with his possessions. (Matt 19:22) The hearers of the Prophet Ezekiel, notwithstanding all their approbation of his ministry and their professions of personal regard, could never be prevailed upon to renounce and mortify this evil's propensity (Ezek 33:31): and we read of some in Isaiah's days, whom neither the frowns nor chastisements of Jehovah could reclaim from it (Isa 57:17). The great proportion of those who make a profession of religion in our day, are like the thorny-ground hearers, in whom "the good seed is choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life, so that they bring forth no fruit to perfection." (Luke 8:14) But the most terrible of all examples is that of Demas, who, after having attained such eminence in the Christian Church as to be twice joined with St. Luke by Paul himself in his salutations to the saints, was turned

aside at last, and ruined by this malignant principle; "Demas hath forsaken us, having loved this present world." (2 Tim 4:10) Thus it will operate wherever it is indulged: it will have the same effect as "loading our feet with thick clay," when we are about to run a race; and will shut the door of heaven against us, when we apply for admission there. Of this God has faithfully warned us: and, to fix the warning more deeply in our minds, he even appeals to ourselves respecting the justice of the sentence, and the certainty of its execution: "Know ye not, that the covetous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?" (1 Cor 6:9,10)

To improve the subject, and assist you in mortifying this corrupt principle, we recommend you to consider,

1. The shortness of human life

Who knows not, that our life is but "a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away?" Shall we then be anxious about matters which will be so soon terminated? Should we not rather live as pilgrims and sojourners, that are passing onward towards their eternal home? It will soon be of not the smallest moment to us whether we were rich or poor. The instant that the Rich Man's soul was required of him, his riches profited him not; they could not procure so much as a drop of water to cool his tongue: nor did the troubles of Lazarus leave any sting to interrupt or lessen his joys, when once he was safely lodged in Abraham's bosom. Let us then, like the holy Apostle, "die daily:" let us "weep as though we wept not, and rejoice as though we rejoiced not, and possess as though we possessed not, and use the world as though we used it not; because the fashion of this world passeth away." (1 Cor 7:29-31)

2. The vanity of those excuses by which men justify their sin

Every one has some cloak wherewith to cover his sin. One says, I only desire a competency. But a competency, in God's estimation, may be a very different thing from what it is in ours: we may be desiring so many hundreds a year; but he says, "Having food and raiment, be therewith content." Another says, "I care not for myself, but only for my family: and must not I provide for them?" But we must no more covet an earthly portion for them than for ourselves: the welfare of their souls should be our great concern for them, as well as for ourselves. Another says, I am poor, and therefore cannot be supposed to be under the influence of covetousness. But the principle of covetousness may be as strong in a beggar as in any other person: for envy and discontent are as much branches of covetousness, as dishonesty or avarice can be. To all then, I would say, beware of the deceitfulness of sin, and the treachery of your own hearts; and be afraid, lest, after being acquitted by your fellow-creatures, you should at last be condemned by your God. (1 Tim 6:9)

3. The infinite excellency of eternal things

As the Apostle says, "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit," so I would say; Covet not earthly things, wherein is excess; but covet heavenly things, even to the utmost possible fulness; for in them there is no excess. It is not possible to desire too earnestly, or to seek too diligently, an interest in Christ: nor can you take too great delight in the enjoyment of him, or fear too much the loss of his favour. Here is scope for all the energies of our minds. In reference to heavenly things then I would say, Covet earnestly the best gifts: enlarge your desires to the utmost extent of your capacity to receive, and of God's ability to bestow. However wide you open Your mouth. God will fill it.

Taken from *Expository Outlines on the whole Bible*, by Charles Simeon Vol. 12

A VILE WEED AND A FAIR FLOWER

C.H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

"Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me."—Hebrews 13:5, 6

Is it not deeply humiliating, beloved friends, that the best of Christians should need to be cautioned against the worst of sins? May the consecrated become covetous? Is it possible that the regenerate may drivell into misers? Alas, what perils

surround us, what tendencies are within us! Although a man may be a sincere believer in the self-sacrificing Jesus, yet it is needful to say to him, "Let your conversation be without covetousness." Covetousness is a vice of a very degrading kind, and it is therefore the more surprising that those who have a renewed nature, and in whom the Spirit of God dwells, should require to be warned against bowing down their souls before it, and yet such is the necessity that once and again the saints are warned against "covetousness, which is idolatry." As long as Israel is in the wilderness she is not out of danger from the golden calf. There is no superfluous text in the Bible, had there been no peril, there would have been no precept; but, alas, the best of saints may be betrayed into the basest sins. Moreover, the common talk of the people, with whom we daily mingle in business, is so much about buying and selling and getting gain that we are apt to be entangled in their nets and find ourselves in the meshes of their craft before we are well aware of it. It is hard to live where greed grasps all, and not to try to save a little for ourselves out of the wreck. "Take heed and beware of covetousness," is a needful caution for these latitudes.

It appears from our text that the children of God need also to be exhorted to cherish that most simple and natural of virtues-contentment. One would think that, at least in some instances, they would have this good thing as a matter of course. Among our villagers we have met with persons so well satisfied with their lowly lot that they would not cross the sea to gain an empire. Yet their contentment has sprung up wild as the daisies and buttercups of their own meadows, for they have not been acquainted with the truth as it is in Jesus, or the blessed hope which makes trials light to bear. Do Christians, then, need to be admonished with precepts, and stimulated with promises, to make them yield the commonplace virtues of life? Do their fields refuse to grow "the herb called heartsease," which simple folk have gathered unsown from their little garden-plots? Must believers be exhorted with earnestness if you would have them contented? It is even so. Against the worst of vices they need to be warned, and towards the humblest of virtues they need to be exhorted. O Lord, thou knowest us better than we know ourselves, for thou understandest what poor, faulty things even thine own children are. The best of men are men at the best. Unless the grace of God had engaged to keep them every moment, and to defend them from the temptations of their many foes, they would long ago have utterly perished from the way. Great need have they to say, "The Lord is my helper," for if he be not so, they will fall a prey to covetousness and discontent.

At this time I have to address you, not upon some high and lofty theme, but upon a simple matter of every-day life. Here in this sublime epistle, which tells us of the person of Christ-the glory of his sonship and the grandeur of his priesthood-here in this storehouse of interpretation, which opens up the most cherished statutes and ordinances of the Old Testament, only to show how they fade and vanish before the excellence of the New Covenant; here, I say, in this epistle to the Hebrews, we find ourselves charged to avoid a vice which reason itself should cause us to abhor, and challenged to exhibit a virtue which nature itself should commend to us. Plain is the sailing; the rock is conspicuous, shun covetousness; the haven is open, anchor in content. Yet need we even here the teaching of the Holy Spirit, that we may shun covetousness and cultivate contentment. Plain and pointed are the words, "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have": may our lives as plainly show these commands written out in act and deed by the Holy Ghost.

Our discourse, therefore, like the text which dictates it, must run out in three distinct branches. There is a covetousness to be eschewed, a contentment to be entertained, and a confidence to be established: this last is referred to in the words,—"So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me."

I. First, I shall have to say a little about COVETOUSNESS. We are told that our conversation is to be "without covetousness." The term "conversation" includes, as you know, the whole of our lives. It is true that we are not to talk covetously, but conversation means far more than speech; it includes thoughts, words, and actions: in fact, the whole of life.

Taking the first meaning of conversation, namely, talk, we ought not in our words to be on the side of those who grip for wealth or growl for wage, who grasp for power or grind the poor. We ought not in our talk to take part with the churl and the illiberal. If we hear of a mean transaction, and it is called a sharp stroke of business and commended as something clever, we are not to sanction it even with a smile; but make our looks and our language alike discountenance over-reaching and oppression. The skinning of flints and the driving of screws are practiced by many people as if they were positively meritorious, and there are those who, while they would shrink from doing aught so questionable themselves, will smile at the crooked policy of others, perhaps feebly blaming the fraud, but all the while admiring the cuteness which carried it out and pocketed the result. With satiric praise instead of severe censure, they will say, "Wonderful man that!"

Nobody can ever get on the blind side of his head. He can get blood out of gateposts, and profits out of losses." Those who praise sharpers are the patrons of thieves. Never think that dexterity will condone deceit, or cleverness excuse a lie. Let your conversation savour of grace and generosity, and of kindness altogether unselfish: and never let it flitter the successful trickster or the greedy grinder of the needy. Never let your language be such as might help to sharpen the cunning of a Laban or sanction the churlishness of a Nabal. This be far from you. "Let your conversation be without covetousness."

But our conversation has to do with our actions as well as our words. The sugar of words is sickening if it be not attended with the honey of deeds. Let our whole life in our dealings with our fellow men be moved by liberal principles, and enriched with a generous spirit. Let us be full of kindness, full of thoughtfulness, full of a desire that others may live as well as ourselves-that our coming into a country may not be like the coming of the Tartar's horse, of which it is said that no grass will grow where once it sets its foot. The miser is a creature too hungry, too greedy, too ravenous, to allow any other cattle to feed after him; he makes the land barren, by gnawing the very roots out of the ground. There are some whose whole life is the use of the rake to scrape everything to themselves, and these men leave nothing for others, however honest and industrious they may be. This is not Christ-like, nor will Christ own one who thus lives to himself. Let your actions, then, in trade and labour, as well as your words, be without covetousness.

But this will not do unless the word "conversation" takes in our desires, our projects, our plans, our thoughts. We must be without covetousness within, for if that vice reigns in the soul it is sure to rule in the life. Our prayer should be that of David, "Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness." Why is a man miserly in his actions? Why, because he is miserable in his thoughts. If the inner man were right, the outer man could not be wrong. Beloved, may God cleanse our way, both in private and in public, from anything like greed, that we may be obedient to the text, "Let your conversation be without covetousness."

It is so very easy a thing to be covetous, that no class of society is free from it. A man may be very poor and covetous withal, and a man may be exceedingly rich and still may think that he is not half rich enough. It is not possible to satisfy the greedy. If God gave them one whole world to themselves they would cry for another; and if it were possible for them to possess heaven as they now are, they would feel themselves in hell, because others were in heaven too, for their greed is such that they must have everything or else they have nothing. Unless they can call all things theirs, they are as miserable as Haman, who, although all Shushan bowed before him was not content, because one poor Jew who sat in the gate would not pay him homage. A covetous spirit can enter anywhere, and can live anywhere. It is necessary that we search ourselves, lest the wretched lust of greed should fix itself upon us; for, remember, it can live in one room in a back street, but it can also live in the most sumptuous mansion of Belgravia; it can starve itself to save a shilling, and it can indulge itself in all manner of extravagance to grasp a fortune. Covetousness has many ways of manifesting itself, and the text does not warn us against one of those ways, but against them all. "Let your conversation be without covetousness."

I have said that covetousness has many ways of showing itself. Let me mention some of them. In some it is most seen in repining and complaining against their lot. God has so circumstanced them that they scarcely ever have more than barely enough. They have struggled to rise, but they have never succeeded; probably because they have not the capacity for so doing. There must be people in the world to take the rough side of it, and these men are evidently of the number, for although they are anxious to make head-way in the world, yet they never rise an inch. Now, if we know our lot, it is idle to refuse it. If we do so, our conversation is not without covetousness; we are not satisfied with the things that we have. We are not satisfied with our heavenly Father's will, nor willing that he should be Father and that we should be children. We have not learned to say, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt." Here is the neglected part of our education, and we must go to school again to the Holy Spirit. There are some complaining ones who would be no happier if their lot were changed. If they were lifted from a cottage to a palace they would repine still, for repining is far more a matter of the heart than of the condition; and a mind that has not bowed to the will of God in one place would be rebellious also in another, and would rebel still. There be some who have all that heart could wish who still murmur, and still think that God deals hardly with them. This disease is born and bred in our very bones, and it needs the grace of God to get it out of us. It is ill when it shows itself in a perpetual fault-finding with all that providence appoints, in always grumbling that we are left out in the cold, as if in every distribution of divine love we came in for the last portion and the least share, and were doomed to be the forgotten ones of the family. Shake off that spirit, beloved. God help us all to get rid of every particle of it, for it savours not of grace, but it is earthly, sensual, devilish.

In some others this covetous principle shows itself in envying others. If others are better off, or more esteemed, they straightway seem to regard them as enemies, cannot think well of them, cannot wish them well, would almost rejoice to see them dragged down. I have known some rich persons that were very proud; I have known some poor people who were prouder still: and their envying of those who were better off has developed in them a pride of an almost ferocious character, akin to the fury of savages. Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous, but who is able to stand before envy? Now, if I envy a man, I am clearly guilty of covetousness, for I wish that something which he has were not his, but mine. And that may happen to you when you do not think about his property. You may be covetous of his gifts. Somebody in the little school to which you belong can address the children better than you: do you ever catch yourself feeling jealous of him? Go before God and weep over it, and pray the feeling down. Possibly you are a minister, and alas, even with us this wretched feeling will come in. Some star outshines ours, and we are likely to be eclipsed, and straightway we are covetous of our honour. We do not like it, brethren, but if we were right at heart with God as we ought to be we should glory in being excelled by our fellow-servants; we should be glad for our heavenly Father to be better served than we can serve him, and for the church of God to have more valued servants in it than we are ever likely to be. This is not easy, because envy preys upon us, that compound of meanness and malice, that vilest reptile of the old serpent's brood, this ill-natured vice shows itself generally in finding fault. Of course our brethren are not perfect; but why should we take a delight in pointing out their peculiarities, their eccentricities, or their shortcoming? If they win a great many to Christ the question is sceptically mooted, "But how will their converts wear?" What makes us raise the question? Is it brotherly love? If throngs gather around them, we say, "Ah, they are a nine days' wonder: that little excitement will soon pass off." Is it grace or envy which makes us hope so? Perhaps we complain that they are very young. This, I suppose, they cannot help; we were once young ourselves, and would like to be so still. Or else we say, on the other hand, they have passed their meridian, and if they flourish for a little while, their sun is setting, and it is not much they will ever achieve. Ah, greed of honour, what is there which thou wilt not say? Would God that Christians would cease from tearing one another! Let your conversation be without that covetousness which shows itself in envy. If the Lord has given you one talent, use it; but do not waste your time in finding fault with him who has five talents. If your Master makes you a hewer of wood, throw your strength into your felling and cleaving, do not throw the axe at your fellowservant; and if he makes you a drawer of water, do not empty your buckets on your neighbour, but do your own service well, and bring what you have done and lay it at your Master's feet. This will be thankworthy: this will be Christlike. You will then be obeying the injunction, "Let your conversation be without covetousness."

And covetousness may show itself in another way, namely, by perpetually graving and desiring that which we have not. The old moralists used to say that the man who would be truly rich had better retrench his appetites than increase his fortune. Some men seem as if they never could fix their thoughts on what they have, but they are always in the other tense and mood, thinking of what they could, would, or should have. They have swallowed the two daughters of Solomon's horseleech, and these continually cry, "Give, give." They must have something more: their desires are boundless, the sea is not more ready to swallow up all that it can come at. A little more they told us would content them some years ago, and a great deal more has been added to their stores, but still they want a little more now. Let your conversation be without covetousness in that respect, and be content with such things as ye have.

In many-perhaps in the most numerous class-this anxiety for acquisition betrays itself in fretful fears about the future; and I must in all honesty grant that this form of the vice has sometimes the appearance of being the most excusable of the whole. "What shall I do," we are apt to say, "in case I should be laid aside, and a precarious income should suddenly come to an end? It is not for myself alone: it is for my wife and numerous family that I am chiefly concerned-how could they be provided for?" Many a man lies awake at night desiring to increase his income, not because he is ambitious to be rich, but because he is haunted with the fear of being poor. Gifted, perhaps, for the present with competency, he is still scared with dire forebodings-What will become of my family if I die?" "Or should such and such a source of income be dried up, and it is very precarious, what then will become of my household? What then?" Full many are not content with such things as they have because the dread of a distant season of trial is constantly harassing them. They cannot be happy in the present sunshine because mayhap a storm is brewing out of sight. They cannot lie down in peace because they want to lay up against a rainy day. In vain for them their table is bountifully spread unless they have a store in hand against every contingency that may happen.

Do you notice how precious is that promise which provides for all possible casualties that may befall you? "He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." The censure, therefore, falls where this sacred pledge is unheeded; and he is accounted covetous who walks after the cravings of the flesh rather than after the counsel of the Spirit of God. If God would have thee live by the day, why dost thou want to gather enough for seven days at once? If thy Father bids thee trust

him, why dost thou distrust his paternal care? Use prudent thrift by all means; do not waste what he gives, nor heedlessly forget that you will have wants on the morrow as well as to-day, but abstain from fretfulness, abjure murmuring, and abhor every tendency to unbelief, lest you provoke him to anger:-

"Commit thou all thy griefs And ways unto his hands To his sure truth, and tender care Who earth and heaven commands."

He would not have you careful about those earthly things after which the Gentiles seek. "Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things." "Let your conversation be without covetousness."

This covetousness is a great and crying evil. It is expressly forbidden in the law. It has a commandment all to itself: "Thou shalt not covet." O brother, wouldst thou wish to fly into an evil which the Lord himself accounts so gross that he has branded it across the brow with one of the ten commands of the decalogue: "Thou shalt not covet?"

Covetous people, I have often observed, are classed in Scripture with the worst of criminals. How revolting to be included in such bad company! Here in this very chapter we read, "Whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Let your conversation be without covetousness." Thus covetousness is classed with the very filthiest of vices of the flesh. In another place the apostle says "covetousness, which is idolatry "; and thus it is identified with a loathsome impurity of the spirit. Let the Christian dread it. God is not selfish, God is love: God hoards not, he giveth liberally; he refuses not the poor, he delighteth in mercy. He spreads abroad in the midst of his creatures the good things which belong to him, and he bids them freely gather what he freely gives; even thus would he have us distribute generously and disperse freely without covetousness.

Covetousness is an evil thing, it leads to all sorts of evil; and it is especially evil in times of persecution. The apostle knew that men who loved the world, and hugged it, were not the men to stand fast for God in the day of trial. Those who had the greatest fondness for worldly wealth were the first to turn aside, and forsake the Saviour, when they had to undergo losses and crosses for his name's sake.

Covetousness is a deadly poison, destructive of all virtue; it dries up the milk of human kindness in a man's breast, and makes him hard, callous, indifferent towards the needs of his fellow creatures. How much infamy it fosters! The men whose heart is set on covetousness will do anything for gold: he will venture to stain his hands with blood itself if he may but gain it. I scarcely know any other vice which can more effectually damn its victim: and I speak the more earnestly about it because covetousness can readily enter into a man's heart, and he may not know it. St. Francis de Sales, said that many came to him to confess all manner of sins, and many of them of a glaring nature; but that all his life long he never knew anybody acknowledge covetousness. Do you exclaim, "I wonder why this is?" Well, it is because a man does not like to think that he can be covetous. he cannot bring himself to acknowledge that he has quite gone that length. When his avarice is the most heartless he generally calls it by a prettier name such as prudence, thrift, or carefulness, so as to make it look more respectable. There is a great propensity about gold and silver, and houses and lands, to stick to one's heart and blind the judgment. It is difficult for those who have much to do with wealth to be quite clear of self. Some men, by divine grace, get much, and give much, and use the world, and do not abuse it: but it is of the earth earthy after all, and when it comes into contact with these hearts of ours it will corrupt and corrode. He that has this world's goods has need to watch himself lest his possessions should injure him; and he that has them not had need to watch himself lest his indigence should injure him. There is an evil that cometh by either the having or the not having. And let each man, therefore, be on his guard against it while he listens to the warning voice of the apostle, "Let your conversation be without covetousness."

II. Secondly, as there is a vice to be shunned so there is a virtue to be sought. The theme is more pleasing now that we speak upon CONTENTMENT. "Be content with such things as ye have."

It is, after all, no very great virtue if we should attain it: the more pity, therefore, if we should miss it. The old moralists constantly twit us with the fact that we may have the necessities of life upon very easy terms, whereas we put ourselves to great pains for its luxuries. There have been contented persons whose heads have been clear, their hearts simple, and their habits temperate, though they have not known the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We ought surely then to rise to that low average of sanctity in which our moderation shall be known unto all men.

To be content with such things as we have should be specially easy to us, because we have so much to be thankful for, such constant communications from the great Benefactor, and so certain an assurance that he will withhold no good thing from those that walk uprightly. I am not speaking now of those who have houses and land and goods in abundance, for their repinings are discord indeed; but I speak of all Christians. This world is ours, and worlds to come. Earth is our lodge, and heaven our home. It ought to be easy for us to be contented since all things are ordered for our good. Arranged by our own dear Father's hand, his appointments ought not to be difficult for a loving child to approve. The trial of our faith will soon be over. A long life of affliction is but a pin's point of time. Be it never so painful, we ought to be willing to bear the light affliction, which is but for a moment. We know that God loves us, for we feel his love shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. Should not contentment be easy under such circumstances?

They say, "There is nothing ill that is well taken," and that is the testimony of a heathen: but that no harm can come of that which our God means for our good is quite certain. With his sorest chastisements often come to us his sweetest caresses. Beyond this lower sky, when this brief day is over, we shall be rich to all the intents of bliss. We have a heritage which will require everlasting ages to unfold: we have a treasure laid up which fancy cannot paint, whereof it would sound fabulous to tell. Do we grope just now in darkness? Yet are we children of the day! In reversion now, in possession soon, are the things that are to be revealed to us; and they are far more real than aught we have ever seen with these mortal eyes. It ought not to be a difficult thing for us to be contented here for this brief hour. "What does it matter?" says a traveller, "I shall only stay here one night, I shall be up and away in the morning." And what does it matter to us, brothers and sisters? Till the day break, and the shadows flee away, we may put up with a few hard things, for we may be where our Lord is in his glory within the twinkling of an eye.

True contentment is absolutely essential to happiness. There is a plant called selfishness, and if you will pull it up by its roots you will find that it grows in the soil of misery. Were self completely renounced, and Christ fully received as all in all, sorrow would be so sweetly accepted by us that the sting of it would be taken away. We must be satisfied with what God appoints, or else we shall be constantly the prey of discomfort and the victims of disappointment. O Christian men and women, will ye not seek to be content with such things as ye have?

I believe that contentment depends very much upon taking right views of things. There is, to wit, a short view. To live by the day is the way to be cheerful. If you try to live by the month you will bring home a month's troubles to eat up a day's meat. God has not constructed his people to live by the month: their souls, like their bodies, are fashioned to live by the day. His supplies, his promises, the very prayers he puts into our mouths, all deal with days: "Give us this day our daily bread." "As thy days so shall thy strength be." Live by the day, then, and you will be content.

Take also long views as well as short views. Take the view which says, "It will be all the same a hundred years hence." Take the view which says, "We shall soon laugh at this present little vexation." Take that distant view which says, "When I get to heaven, this great trial will seem very small: when I look from the hill-tops of glory at my present dilemma, it will probably cause me many a smile, to think that I should have been so vexed and tormented by it." Take this view of things—that a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things that he possesses. Full often the more your goods increase the more your cares multiply; the care to keep is often greater than the care to win; while, after all, the care rightly to use ought to be the most weighty care of all. If thy God has loaded a neighbour with ten thousand a-year, thank God that he has not burdened thee in that way. Be glad if he has given thee as much as thou canst carry easily, and no more. When I go for a walk, I like a staff,—just one, but I should not like to be compelled to carry a hundred. Some men appear to me to have a hundred times as much as they can possibly want, and so they are hampered with what might, in moderation, have been their help. Be not eager for great riches, nor seek after large domains in this world, lest thou wallow in wealth, stick in it as in a bog, and drown thy soul. Why load thyself with more clay when thou hast as much to carry now as thou canst well get along with? Be not surprised, therefore, any of you, but rather be thankful if God doth sometimes lighten your load a little to quicken your pace in the heavenly journey.

The secret of true contentment, and the way to get at it, is admirably expressed in these words, "Be content with such things as ye have, for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Some of the most easy-going people in the world are those who have a government pension of so much a month. It is little, but it is sure. If all the banks break, they will get it. They have no trouble as to how the markets fluctuate, or how different stocks rise and fall in value; or what dividends they might derive from investments. It is not a large income that falls to their lot, 'tis true; but then it is all they require, and it is always sure. You say to such a person, "You may set your heart at rest because your supplies come from a sure source." Now, then, that is exactly where the child of God stands: for ye know who hath said—"Thy bread shall be

given thee, and thy water shall be sure." Between now and heaven I do not know who may starve; but I never shall, because the Lord is my Shepherd, and I shall not want. Those clever lawyers, those sharp-teethed schemers, those greedy oppressors, those young lions may lack and suffer hunger; but they that fear the Lord shall not want any good thing. The Christian man's fortune is made. "Oh, but he may be in great straits." Yes, but he shall be supplied in due time. All that he needs in this time state his heavenly Father will give him. He wants but faith to believe this, and he shall find it to be really so: "for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." God's word ought to be taken as truth itself. A promise from the mouth of God is better than a bond signed and sealed by the wealthiest of men. No negotiable securities can be comparable in value to this declaration of the Lord, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." It is put very strongly. In the original there are five negatives, as in the verse you sang just now:-

"The soul that on Jesus hath lean'd for repose, I will not, I will not, desert to his foes That soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake' I'll never, no never, no never forsake."

The five negatives in the last line of that verse correspond with the five placed in this text-"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." It means that in no one single instance will the Lord leave thee, nor in any one particular will he leave thee, nor for any reason will he leave thee. If thou hast cast thyself upon his infinite power and grace, he will carry thee to the end. Not only will he not desert thee altogether, but he will not leave thee even for a little while. He may seem for a small moment to hide his face from thee, but he will still love thee and still supply thy needs. Behind the wall he will pour oil upon the flame if in the front of the wall he permits Satan to throw water upon it. He will feed thee somehow-by the back door, if not by the front-by the ravens if not by the doves. If the brook Cherith fails, he will find a widow woman, even in a distant land, who in all her straits shall, nevertheless, feed the servant of God.

"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Surely we cannot fail to be contented if we do but get fast hold of this promise. Are you not always in the divine presence? Saith he not "I will never leave thee." No carpet on the floor, no paper on the walls; no pictures, no furniture-the room mean and unsightly. Yes, but suppose God is there, what matters it? Buckingham Palace has not a drawing-room to compare with that little room upstairs against the thatch, or with that garret where you cannot stand upright, where the stars peep in at night between the tiles. If God be there, I would sooner live in the worst cottage's worst room, on the pittance of the parish, than where the floor was paved with marble and the richest hangings adorned the ample chambers but the divine glory was unknown. If God be there-"I will never leave thee"-then wherever the child of God is cast, there is a glory round about him which makes him sublime in the midst of his poverty.

"I will not forsake thee," he adds: by which I understand that, as he will not withdraw his presence, so will he not withhold his help. "I want," say you. "I want, I want." Go on with the list. "I want- a thousand things." "I will not forsake thee," says he. "I will see thee through the trial; I will carry thee over the difficulty. I will bear thee on. I will lift thee over. I will bring thee out. I will abide with thee to the end. I will not leave thee nor forsake thee." Is not that enough for thy faith to feed on? What more dost thou want? Suppose he had said, "I will send my angels with thee," or, "I will move all mankind to help thee," it would not come to so much in its real meaning as this. "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

But when did God originally say this? Well, you cannot find the exact words in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, but he did say the same in effect to Jacob at Bethel, and to Joshua before he went to the invasion of Canaan, David said it in the Lord's name to Solomon, and Isaiah said the same to the whole people of God. Whatever God says to one saint he says, virtually, to all saints who have like faith. This renders the Bible such a rich storehouse of comfort to us. No Scripture is of private interpretation, but all Scripture is given for our personal appropriation. No promise is hedged about as the exclusive property of the one man who received it. If thou be of like character and in like case, thou mayest, O believer, take the Lord's words to others as being spoken to thyself. Thou mayest plead a promise which God made to Joshua or to Jacob with just as much confidence as if he had made it especially to thee. Remember this, and be content with such things as ye have.

III. Our last point, upon which our time will only admit of a word or two, is the CONFIDENCE with which we may encourage ourselves and bid defiance to a frowning world. "So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man can do unto me."

This promise of the Lord is fitted to nerve us with courage, as well as to solace us with contentment. Chicken-hearts and craven fears ill become the disciples of Christ. If we are oppressed, or if we have to encounter opposition, we may just go straight ahead in the strength of our text, and say, "What can man do unto me?" If God be our helper, dear brethren, why

should we shrink or falter, why should we droop or look dismayed, why should we hold our peace or speak with bated breath? Are there any of you who are afraid to confess my Lord's name before men, to enlist in his service, to buckle on his armour, to avow yourselves his followers? Parley no longer, I beseech you, with such ungracious fears. Great thoughts have stirred within your breasts while we have presented the consoling word, and the Spirit of (God has rested upon it. Be great in act as you have been in thought. Since he has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee," why are you ashamed to come and own him? "I am afraid I might dishonour his name," say you. But he has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." "I am very weak," say you. He has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." "I might bring dishonour upon the church to which I should unite myself." Very likely you would if he left you, but he has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." It is always safe to do what God bids. There can be no sound policy in neglecting a divine precept. So come forward and say boldly, "The Lord is my helper."

Possibly some of you have been persecuted. Hard names have been hurled at you: I hope you did not cry because of that. Poor child of God, thy strength is very small if thou art afraid of an ugly name. We have had a good many in our time; they have not broken any of our bones, nor will they injure you. "Oh, but you do not know what the chaff of the shop is." No, but give them some of your wheat in return. Let them see how a Christian can bear and forbear when their fun grows foul, how he can endure reproach for righteousness sake. You will be master of the situation yet. "Alas, sir, but I am threatened with the loss of my situation unless I will go contrary to divine commands." Then do not flinch, but tell your heavenly Father all about it. Commit your cause to him. Let not fifty places or five hundred people make you swerve from the course that faith dictates and duty demands. Appeal to God, and he will provide for you. Any temporary loss you may sustain will be much more than made up in the prosperity he awards you: or if not in that way, in the peace he vouchsafes you and the honour he confers on you in suffering for Christ's sake.

Oh that this very night the veil might be taken off many faces, the burden unloaded from many shoulders, and fear dispelled from many hearts! If you have cast off your grievous disquietudes while I have been talking, do not put them on again when you get outside. I have known many a poor tried child of God forget his trouble when he was sitting here, but he looked it up before he reached his home, and so he returned to his old condition. "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee. He will never suffer the righteous to be moved." You have been looking too far ahead, dear brother. Cure that fault by looking further still. Recollecting the coming of our Lord, and the joy of his appearing, you may ease your pains in the present. Oh to live exempt from care by the energy of prayer! Oh, to believe in God implicitly, to rest in him calmly, to trust in Christ steadfastly, and to take his yoke upon us cheerfully: then we shall find rest to our souls by learning of him. The Lord help us all to do so, for his name's sake.

The Lord help us all to do so, for his name's sake. Amen.

THE WAY OF BAALAM

L.R. Shelton, Jr.

2 Peter 2

"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not. For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment; And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly; And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;) The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be

punished: But chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, selfwilled, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities. Whereas angels, which are greater in power and might, bring not railing accusation against them before the Lord. But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption; And shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you; Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children: Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever. For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage. For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."

I take up my pen to write on a subject that has weighed heavy upon my heart for many months. A subject that the scriptures warn us about in many places; a sin that characterizes the false teachers and preachers of our day; a sin that is always associated with unbridled lust, lasciviousness and idolatry. It is the sin of COVETOUSNESS which is the theme of this issue.

I was led of the Holy Spirit to deliver a series of messages this past fall from 2 Peter 2, which gives us a vivid picture of the scene of our day in the religious world as Satan has filled the pulpits, the airways-radio and TV with false teachers and preachers whose one aim is to deceive and beguile precious souls into every false damnable heresy possible; getting them to follow them in their ways of unbridled lust and lasciviousness, promising them liberty, while they themselves are the servants of corruption. They have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray-following the way of Balaam, who loved the wages of unrighteousness. They have a heart that they have exercised with covetous practices, and through covetousness, lust and greed they, with feigned words-lying words-cunning false arguments, make merchandise of them, that is, seducing precious souls, bringing them under their control, while they themselves have eyes full of adultery, and cannot cease from sin, beguiling-bewitching, enchanting, alluring unstable souls and leading them to hell. (2 Peter 2: 1,2,3,14,15,19)

The word of God is very plain that "The Way of Balaam": 2 Peter 2:15 which is covetousness, always leads to "The Doctrine of Balaam" which is spelled out for us in the letter to the church at Pergamos in Revelation 2: 13,14. The Lord said "I know thy works and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is...where Satan dwelleth...I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication." Idolators and fornicators under the cloak of religion: for covetousness is called a cloak in 1 Thessalonians 2:5.

The story of Balaam, the false prophet is given to us in Numbers 22, 23, 24 and 31. His covetous heart went after the gold and silver that King Balak had offered to him to curse the children of Israel. But when he could not curse them because God had put a blessing in his mouth for his people, then his greedy covetous heart, wanting the reward more than anything, told Balak to have his women entice and seduce the men of Israel to come and worship their gods and commit fornication, and, of course when they did, God cursed them and Balaam received his reward. But he paid for it with his life because when God commanded Moses to send the army of Israel to punish the Midianites for their transgression, Numbers 31:8 tells us that Balaam was killed along with the Midianites.

In Exodus 20:17, we read "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's".

The word covet is translated most frequently in the New Testament as James calls it-LUST. It means to desire inordinately or without due regard to the rights of God or others: to desire wrongfully. And the particular nature of the

10th commandment is that it reaches beneath the externals of our conduct to the hidden activities of the mind, heart and will, revealing the motives and intents of the heart and condemns sin when it is first entertained in our affections. James 1: 14-15 bears this out: "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust. It bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death". So the exceeding sinfulness of covetousness is that it breaks all the commandments in the heart before they are committed in the overt act.

The Greek word for greed is very descriptive: it means to thirst for having more, always having more and still more! It is as if a man in order to quench his thirst, takes a drink of salt water which happens to be the only water available. This makes him even more thirsty, so he drinks again and again until his thirst kills him. So it is with the sin of covetousness or greed: it is the uncontrolled yearning to have, to have more, more and still more, until covetousness kills the soul of man, and then he abides under the curse of God forever. As Proverbs 27:20 tells us: "Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied": what a sin! Oh my friend, that's a deep-seated sin in the soul-'never satisfied'. Covetousness damns a man to hell!

Covetousness is a damning sin because it hinders the Word of God from coming into the soul! Through covetousness, a man sees only his fleshly desires rather than the needs of his soul, so it blinds the eyes of his understanding and closes his ears to hearing God's claim upon him and his life. Through self-interests, his ears are closed to the precepts and commandments of the Word of God which God has given for the good of mankind and for His own glory. This applies to the false teachers and preachers and those who follow their 'pernicious ways'. They do not know that they "feed on ashes, with a deceived heart not knowing there is a lie in their right hand" Isaiah 44:20: "Their moral understanding is darkened and their reasoning is blinded. They are alienated, estranged, self-banished from the life of God with no share in it. This is because of the ignorance, the want of knowledge and perception, the willful blindness that is deep-seated in them, due to their hardness of heart, to the insensitiveness of their moral nature. In their spiritual apathy, they have become callous and past feeling and reckless, and have abandoned themselves a prey to unbridled sensuality, eager and greedy to indulge in every form of impurity that their depraved desires may suggest and demand" Ephesians 4: 18,19.

As I said before, the one reason false teachers and preachers are raised up by Satan is to deceive precious souls with a false gospel that saves no one, but makes them twofold more children of hell than their deceivers. To deceive means to mislead, defraud, cheat, seduce, swindle, false, lying, untrustworthy. They do this by beguiling unstable souls, coming as angels of light. The word beguile means-bewitching, enchanting, alluring, charming, captivating, attractive, entertaining, enthralling, delightful. So they come as an angel of light. They never stand up and say 'I am a false preacher', no "they come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging-devouring-wolves", Matthew 7:15. They seek whom they may deceive for the sole purpose of making "merchandise of them", 2 Peter 2:3, that is, to get their money, gold, silver, lands, stocks, bonds, and bring them under their control to use them for their evil purposes. This all comes out of a heart of COVETOUSNESS.

There are many warnings in scriptures against these deceiving, beguiling false teachers and preachers. In 2 Timothy 3: 4,5,6,7 we read: "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lust, ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth". Oh you women who are reading this, please give heed to what is being said, for this warning is primarily for you. Please listen to this translation and tremble for fear that you will be beguiled by these false teachers and preachers and come under their control. They will be lovers of sensual pleasures and vain amusements more than and rather than lovers of God. For although they hold a form of piety- true religion, they deny and reject and are strangers to the power of it, their conduct belies the genuineness of their profession. Avoid all such people, turn away from them. For among them are those who worm their way into homes (in person, by radio, TV, magazines, books) and captivate silly and weak-natured and spiritually dwarfed women, loaded down with the burden of their sins, and easily swayed and led away by various desires and seductive impulses. These weak women will listen to anybody who will teach them. They are forever inquiring and getting information, but never able to arrive at a recognition and knowledge of the truth, that they are lost sinners. Christ came to seek and to save only those who are lost, who acknowledge their utter lost condition before God and who trust in, as a lost sinner, the only Saviour, Jesus Christ the Lord.

Let me quote three verses of scripture from Colossians 2, without comment, to show that the word continually warns us against those false teachers and preachers who would deceive us: v. 4 "And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words"-v.8,9: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men,

after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily". v.18: "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind."

Those who have gone the "Way of Balaam" for reward-eaten up with covetousness-those against whom we are here warned, are men who have a false commission, never having been called by God to the service they are engaged in; for God never calls a man to misrepresent Him. They preach error, which is subversive of "the doctrine according to godliness" 1 Timothy 6:3, and the fruit they bear is a base imitation of the fruit of the Spirit.

The chief identifying mark of these false teachers and preachers has always been: "peace, peace, when there is no peace" Jeremiah 8:11. They heal the wounds of sinners slightly, Jeremiah 8:11 and "daub with untempered mortar" Ezekial 13:10. "They prophesy smooth things" Isaiah 30:10-inventing easy ways to heaven, pandering to corrupt nature. There is nothing in their preaching which searches the conscience and renders the empty professor uneasy. Nothing which humbles and causes their hearers to mourn before God, but rather that which puffs up, makes them pleased with themselves and rest content in a false assurance. These false ones and those who follow them are not broken souls before God with humble hearts, having learned from Matthew 5:3 that "the blessed man is poor in spirit"; that is he knows nothing spiritually, has nothing spiritually, and can do nothing spiritually. Humility is not in them for they know nothing of sorrow over sin, crying out against a proud heart, and have not the Holy Spirit to lead them. They know nothing of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Therefore, they do nothing for the glory of God, but only for their own glory, or their covetous hearts go after 'the error of Balaam for reward', the reward of the gratification of their own lustful desires.

But on the other hand, I have known false preachers who preached depravity, repentance, saving faith, and seemingly believed in the doctrines of grace, but, to their shame and damnation, they themselves knew nothing of true repentance and lived ungodly lives, promising liberty to others. They themselves were slaves of depravity and defilement, having eyes full of adultery and could not cease from sin. Holiness was not in their theology, always saying, 'the blood covers it all' or 'we are under grace you know', justifying their adulterous ways by the cross, not knowing that "God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness", 1 Thessalonians 4:7. Not hearing the word "that without holiness no man shall see the Lord", Hebrews 12:14.

Then if you look at the false preachers and teachers who continually proclaim the false gospel of health, wealth and prosperity as they beguile unwary souls, telling them if they will send them \$1000.00, God will give back to them ten fold or a hundred fold. These poor souls give and give and the only ones getting rich are these false teachers and preachers, using the wealth to satisfy their damnable lusts. If you take money out of the picture, they would be gone, for they do nothing for the glory of God and precious lost souls.

Then, there are those who make much of the Holy Spirit, claiming His power to do all things, when the Holy Spirit is not the author of confusion. He is certainly not the author of all this emotional carrying on today.

What the Holy Spirit by His power does do for us in our everyday walk as the children of God is to fulfill the Apostles Paul's prayer for us in Col 1:10-12a - Listen and rejoice "that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work., and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; giving thanks unto the Father."

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, John 14:17 and brings us into all truth about our depraved sinful hearts and the precious work of the Lord Jesus Christ upon Calvary's Cross to redeem us and bring us to God. He is not a lying spirit but the Holy Spirit who takes the things of Christ and reveals them unto us.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Holiness, Romans 1:4 and never leads a man into anything else but sanctification: "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification", 1 Thessalonians 4:3, to be made in the image and likeness of Christ.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Grace, Hebrews 10:29, and He never stands by and lets us use His Grace as "a cloak of lasciviousness", Jude 4, to go on sinning that grace may abound, for according to Romans 6 in salvation, He breaks the power of sin and it "no longer reigns in our mortal body" v.11. Where sin abounded, now grace does much more abound, and where sin reigns unto death, so grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord, Romans 5:20,21.

I could go on and show you that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Regeneration: John 3:5; the Spirit of Promise: Acts 2:33; the Spirit of Life: Romans 8:2; the Spirit of Adoption: Romans 8:15; the Spirit of Prayer: Romans 8:26,27, Ephesians 6:17,18; and the Fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance: Galatians 5:22,23, and not covetousness, lust, bitterness, pride, wrath, anger, evil speaking and all malice. My friend, we do not use the Holy Spirit, He sovereignly uses us and gives to us all that is needed to get us to our heavenly home at last and the fruit He produces unto holiness is Christ likeness.

Now let us try to bring this to a close by again warning all of us against the deceivableness of Satan's angels of light who try to beguile us as he did Eve in the garden through his subtlety. Remember these false teachers and preachers are motivated by COVETOUSNESS so they deceive through 'beguiling unstable souls'. Their preaching is with enticing words of man's wisdom and they are captivating in their presentation of their false gospel. They are charming, entertaining, delightful to hear. They are alluring as they present the attractiveness of their false gospel. They make it all sound so delightful and attractive for they throw you the bait of their false gospel but you do not know that it covers up the hook that will catch you and drown you in the perdition of hell and damnation.

Remember most false teachers and preachers preach works for salvation in one form or another. They leave out sin-they leave out holiness-they leave out the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration-they leave out the Lordship of Christ and His right to rule over you in all aspects of your life.

They deny the sovereign Lord who bought them. My friend, there are more ways than one of doing this. Sometimes they deny that He has bought them by just leaving Him out altogether. They say they are preaching or teaching a Christian message, and yet the name of Christ is never mentioned. God is mentioned, but Christ the Lord is not. They deny Him by leaving Him out. Sometimes they deny Him by not making Him absolutely central, vital and essential. If Christ is not in the center, if He is not central, He is being denied. He is either in the center or He is nowhere.

Again, they may deny Him by denying His Person, by regarding Him as man only, as a good teacher, a wonderful example, but denying His Deity; denying Him as the God-Man, in all the glory and fulness of His blessed Person.

Or they deny Him most of all and most seriously by denying His atoning work, by denying the fact that if He had not gone to the cross, every man would remain doomed and under the wrath of God, by denying that this is the only way to God, by failing to see themselves as hopeless, damned sinners who are only saved because He bore their sins in His own body on the cross. They deny the centrality of the cross.

Listen carefully! Whatever teaching a man may have to offer to you, if the Christ on Calvary's cross is not the central point at the heart of it, I say he is a false teacher or preacher. And no one can give hope either to the individual or to the world today who is not centered absolutely upon that one and only atonement of Christ. He is a false preacher or teacher who has not Christ and His atonement at the center of his message. Remember, if the above is not absolutely true in a man's preaching, he is a false preacher, eaten up with covetousness, for he is not giving glory to Him in whom "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily", Colossians 2:9.

Now you ask the question: how then does God save a soul? Good, a very timely question-by the grace of God the Holy Spirit filling my heart with His words I will answer you.

First let us understand from the beginning that salvation is of the Lord. It is a work of God's Holy Spirit in us, for only He can regenerate and raise a dead soul from the grave of sin, only He can give life, Ephesians 2:1. By this work of regeneration in us by the Holy Spirit, we are shown our sinful condition before God, that we are lost sinners, depraved sinners and abide under the wrath of God because we have broken His Holy Law. A man must know that he has sinned and come short of the glory of God.

The Holy Spirit, by the word of God, shows us that God Himself has provided His Lamb, His only begotten Son, to die as our Substitute and by faith in His blood we shall be justified from all things. Along with this, He works in our hearts the gift of repentance, which leads us to turn to God from sin, confessing our sins, forsaking our sins and our way, falling at His feet in humble sorrow for our sins of rebellion, pride, unbelief and lustful passion, hoisting the white flag of surrender, laying down the armor of our rebellion and confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Faith and repentance go together; where one is found, the other is there. When God saves by grace through faith, He makes us a new creation in Christ. He gives us a new heart, a new nature, a new spirit and gives us His Holy Spirit to teach us, lead us, keep us, pray in us, and to continue to reveal to us from His Holy Word what we have in Christ. In this new life, Christ is the Head, the Lord, the Saviour, the Great High Priest who lives to make intercession for us.

The gate or door through which we enter into this way of spiritual life by faith is Christ. He is all in all and we continue in this way by Christ, for He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are always coming to Him, looking to Him for every need, for He alone is our Life, our Hope, our Salvation, our Redeemer, our all in all. He is made unto us Wisdom for our ignorance; Righteousness for our justification; Sanctification for our filthiness; and Redemption for our enslavement. All of this makes us to desire daily to walk in the pathway of righteousness and true holiness.

Remember, true saving faith has Christ alone for its Object. Why? Because true saving faith is made up of three things-first, when we look within, we find no good thing to commend us to God-second, we must go outside of ourselves to find the One God will accept in our stead-third, true saving faith goes to Christ, the One set forth for our Salvation. Not only does faith operate like this when we come to Christ for salvation, but acts like this every day of our life, for we have none other to go to but Him.

A final word of admonition: FORSAKE THE WAY OF BALAAM; FOLLOW THE WAY OF CHRIST

