

What Is Covetousness?

A few weeks ago, I ran a blog post on gambling in which I argued that the true problem with gambling is that it provokes covetousness. In the next day or two, I found myself talking about it with Landon. He observed that he agreed with the point, but he felt that most of us could benefit from a more specific understanding of covetousness.

I think this is a great point. “Covetousness” and its variants are used a couple of dozen times in the ESV. We know it’s a sin. However, we often don’t know exactly what the specific sin is. The dictionary defines covetous as, “Inordinately or wrongly desirous of wealth or possessions; greedy.” So, basically, the dictionary is telling us that it’s a sin when we want things in a bad way. Thanks, dictionary! That’s really helpful!

However, even though the dictionary doesn’t offer much guidance here, God’s word does. There are many passages that highlight the problems that covetousness creates. When we piece them all together, we can come up with a useful answer to the question, “What is covetousness?”

The first such passage that I want us to examine says that covetousness is **DEFINING OURSELVES BY OUR POSSESSIONS**. Jesus makes this point in Luke 12:15. Basically, if we can come to the core of who we are, and we find money or stuff there, we’ve got a covetousness problem.

There are a number of different ways this can be true. In our society, it’s perhaps most obvious in the materialistic types who have to have the biggest possible house, the newest possible car, and the most expensive possible clothes in order to signal to their neighbors that they’ve made it. Often, this kind of behavior takes a tragic turn. We’re surrounded by people who are in debt up to their eyeballs so that they can project the right lifestyle image. They suffer immensely from their financial trials, but they would rather have their brains eaten by zombies than reduce their spending to a level they can afford. Friends, that’s covetousness plain and simple. The sin in their hearts has twisted their lives up like a pretzel.

More respectable, though no less spiritually problematic, is the man who defines himself by his bank balance. I gotta be straight with you, brethren. Materialism doesn’t hold much appeal to me, but those numbers on the computer screen do. Here, the goal isn’t impressing others. It’s security. It’s thinking that every extra dollar we accumulate will make our lives safer, even though our saving will never reach a level where we feel safe. This too is covetousness.

Finally, let’s consider those who define themselves by the businesses they own. Look. I have tremendous respect for small business owners. I’m too risk-averse to

try it for myself, but I admire those who strive to make their own way in the world. However, business owners must make sure that they live like Christians first and business owners second. If that business starts taking up more space in your head than the Lord does, you've got a covetousness problem.

Second, covetousness is CARING MORE ABOUT WEALTH THAN PEOPLE. We learn this from Paul's words in Romans 13:9-10. This passage reveals something profound about God's law. According to Paul, every commandment is an application of the great commandment to love our neighbor. When we violate the law, then, whether we own it or not, we are being unloving. This is true of adultery, it's true of theft, and it's true of covetousness. Whenever we desire somebody's harm for money's sake, we're being covetous.

This is where I locate my moral opposition to gambling. Gambling is fundamentally about money. Otherwise, why not play poker for M&M's or whatever? In order for me to win at gambling—in order for me to win money—somebody else has to lose. They don't want to lose. They want that money too. However, because I can only succeed if they fail, I want them to lose so I can get their money. That sure sounds like covetousness to me.

Of course, gambling is far from the only area where this spirit can manifest itself. People who are willing to cheat and lie and exploit others for the sake of money are being covetous. So too is the office worker who backstabs her co-worker so she can get a promotion and a pay raise.

This can be true in the business world as well. I don't think that being a merchant of some kind is necessarily covetous. If you're selling a good product at a fair price, you're actually helping your customers, not hurting them. However, if you take advantage of your customers' ignorance and trust in you to sell them extras they don't need, or if you take advantage of their desperation to skin them, that's covetous behavior.

I think it's also covetousness when a business goes beyond fair competition in an effort to destroy a rival. If you out-compete somebody else, fine. If you're actively looking to wreck their business so that you can take advantage of the vacuum, not fine.

Third, covetousness is USING SPIRITUAL THINGS FOR FINANCIAL PURPOSES. Here, let's return to a context we've already looked at, with Luke 12:13-14. Of all the people in the Bible, this guy has to be one of the most clueless. Here he is, in the crowd listening to the Son of God. He has the opportunity to ask Jesus about anything. What does he do, though? He asks Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute between him and his brother. He could have had spiritual filet mignon, but he asks for Spam instead.

We probably don't have a whole lot of trouble seeing the problem here, but there are millions of people in our country right now who are making the same mistake. They're religious because they want to get rich. Churches that appeal to this covetous impulse are often very successful. However, this emphasis on wealth is a perversion of the gospel and leads its practitioners to forget what truly matters.

A few years ago, back in Joliet, I baptized a brother named Chris. He's a great guy. He's warm-hearted, fun to be around, loves the Lord, loves His church. However, he drives a truck for a living, and he's always been part of the working class.

Before they came to us, Chris and his family tried worshiping with a local health-and-wealth church. You think those folks appreciated Chris driving up to their nice building on Sunday morning in his beat-up old Jeep and coming into their fancied-up assembly in his golf shirt? They did not. After a few weeks, Chris got sick of everybody else looking down their noses at him and quit coming.

I'm glad that their error eventually led Chris to come to the truth, but we have to see the dangers in that attitude. Our church must always be about laying up treasure in heaven, not on the earth, and we must never forget that a man's soul is more important than his bank balance.

Fourth, covetousness is IDOLATRY. Paul tells us so plainly in Colossians 3:5. We know that God requires us not to put any gods before Him. What Paul does, though, is point out that if we put money before God, then money becomes our god.

This shows us how dangerous covetousness is. Consider, for instance, the Jews of Jesus' day. Ever since the Babylonian captivity, the Jews had rejected the worship of idols. They prided themselves on their devotion to the God who made earth and heaven.

However, the Pharisees were also lovers of money. They would happily twist and distort the Law for financial advantage. According to Paul, then, they were just as much idolaters as their ancestors who bowed down to Baal. They thought they were faithful to God, but they weren't.

It's easy for us to fall into the same trap today. Idolatry is an obvious sin. Either you're worshiping a statue or you aren't, and you pretty well know where you are either way.

Covetousness, though, is not obvious. We don't engage in this kind of idolatry by worshiping a statue of Mammon. Instead, Mammon worship shows up in the way we live our lives. It shows up in putting more of an emphasis on work attendance than church attendance. It shows up in giving our all to earn an extra dollar but refusing to put extra effort into serving the Lord. It shows up in happily receiving God's generosity but not being generous in what we give back to Him. All of those things, and many more like them, are evidence that we are putting another god

before our Creator. If we don't repent of our idolatry, then like the Israelites of old, we won't inherit our promised land either.

Finally, covetousness is A GATEWAY FOR EVIL. Look at Paul's words in 1 Timothy 6:9-10. This is probably the most misquoted verse in the Bible. You hear all the time that money is the root of all evil, but the text doesn't actually say that. There's nothing wrong with money per se. Instead, it is the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil.

I think this is true because of the nature of money. Most lusts can only be satisfied in a narrow range of ways. Take, for instance, the lust for sexual immorality. If I decide that I'm going to give into that lust, there are only a few sins that I can commit to scratch the itch. Those few sins can certainly condemn me to hell, but their scope is limited.

Covetousness isn't like that. Once we decide that we love money more than God, we may well engage in any sin that offers the possibility of enriching us. There, the field is wide open. We can lie because of covetousness. We can steal because of covetousness. We can defraud because of covetousness. We can gossip because of covetousness. We can stir up strife because of covetousness. We can sin sexually because of covetousness. We can even kill because of covetousness. In fact, even though I haven't gone through and checked this, it may well be true that every single sin in the Bible can be provoked by covetousness.

This is why love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Once Satan has gotten that love of money implanted in our hearts, he can use it to lead us just about anywhere. As long as we love money, it's game over spiritually.

The only way to solve the problem, then, is to be vigilant over our hearts. We have to be honest about the choices we're making with our lives and why we're making them. Only then can we protect ourselves from covetousness.

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