

Valuing Your Heart

Exodus 20:17

On the night of November 16, 1930 Mrs. Henrietta Garrett, a lonely 81 year old widow, died in her home in Philadelphia and, unwillingly, started the most fantastic case of inheritance litigation in history. No will could be found for her 17 million dollar estate.

At the time of her death, Mrs. Garrett had one known living relative, a second cousin, and less than a dozen friends. However, attempt to prove relationship to her and to claim a part or all of the estate have been made by more than 26,000 persons from 47 states and 29 countries, represented by more than 3,000 lawyers.

In their frantic attempts, these alleged relatives have committed perjury, faked family records, changed their own names, altered data in church Bibles, and invented wild tales of illegitimacy. Twelve have been fined, Ten given jail sentences, two have committed suicide, and three have been murdered. By the time the case was resolved in the 1950s, her estate increased to more than 30 million dollars.

This rather extreme example illustrates a basic problem in human nature, discontentment. We aren't happy with what we have. We want a bigger house, a spicier marriage, a more promising career. If this is was all there was to it, then it might be motivation to improve ourselves- to take some classes, to work harder, to save more, to make better decisions. But what often happens is that we begin to define what we want in terms of what others have. I want what you've got. When we grow discontented with what we have, we become very jealous of what others have. Other people's stuff somehow seems bigger, brighter, better.

There's a cartoon that shows two fields divided by a fence. Each field is the same size, and each has plenty of green, lush grass. In each field there is a mule, and each mule has his head sticking through the fence eating grass from the other mule's pasture. Each mule thought the other mule's grass was greener, fresher, and better.

Something happens to us emotionally at this point. We feel that we don't have what we want because they've got it. Somehow it's their fault. Now, intellectually, we know this isn't true, but we feel intensely in our gut. Feelings can be a powerful driver when we let them rule us. We feel resentment toward them. We look longingly at what they have. The possessions become more important than the person. The riches more than the relationship.

The problem is not in the possessions themselves. For if we were to magically have all that stuff we want, we would soon grow tired of it, and our eyes would begin to look longingly at someone else who has still better things. No, the problem is not what people out there have. It's what's going on inside here.

I. A Covetous Heart

Here's where we get to a very Bible sounding word. "Covet." This is what the Bible calls coveting. It's very dangerous, and it can become all consuming. This is why the Tenth and final commandment is this. Exodus 20:17 says,

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

This commandment runs the gamut from your neighbor's barn to your neighbor's bedroom. We are not to covet anything she's got. And just to make sure you were paying attention last week. Who is your neighbor? Anyone.

(Advance Slide) God knew this would be a huge problem for us. That's why he gives us this warning. When we aren't content with our own things, we look to our neighbors. We begin to covet. "Covet" is an old-fashioned sounding word that defines a very modern problem. It means "to enthusiastically desire." It's more than desire though. It's when we want something bad enough to do something to get it.

This can be a good thing, if what we want is good and is ours for the taking. The Bible uses this same word in a positive sense for the word of God in Psalm 19:9-10, *"The rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold."* "More to be desired." It's that word "covet." It's good to covet the rules of the LORD more than gold.

Enthusiastic desire by itself isn't bad. It can be good to really, really want some things. Desire can be either good or bad, but when we begin to enthusiastically desire what someone else has, then it's bad. It kills the very underlying principles of the Ten Commandments.

Remember, the Ten Commandments are divided into two halves. The first four have to do with our love for God. The last six focus on our love for others. Loving God and loving others – what Jesus called the two greatest commandments.

When we begin to covet other people's stuff, it erodes our love for God. We are no longer keeping God first, we make idols out of things. We lose respect for the things of God, because our hearts are set on the things of earth, instead of the things of heaven.

Coveting also destroys our love for our neighbor. How can I love my neighbor, if I desperately want what he has or wish he didn't have it.

This last commandment is really basic and fundamental to all the rest, because they merely address our behavior. Look at the first nine. They all concern what we do. But this commandment focuses on what we think and desire. God is not merely concerned about our actions, He looks at the attitude of our heart. And it is here in the heart where the root of behavior lies. If I do not guard my thoughts and desires, then I will not be able to control what I do. If I desire something of my neighbor's bad enough and long enough, it will consume me.

We suffer so much in our lives because of the stress, the pressure, and desire to keep up with the Joneses. If we covet long enough, we will either take it, or it will take us. This is why God is aiming straight at our hearts.

II. Diagnosing the Problem

I need to be clear here. God is not telling us that we can't desire things. Desire in itself is not bad. It's not evil to want something. It's not even wrong to admire what someone else has. Say your neighbor gets a brand new F250 Super Duty Platinum truck. It's okay to think, "Wow! That's a real nice truck. Sweet ride. Wish I could get one of those. It can be okay if you even start making plans to be able to save or afford one. But when you begin to resent your neighbor. When you smile when he gets a dent in his new truck, when you begin to do unhealthy and unholy things so you can get your own, that's the sin of covetousness.

What God is protecting us from is an inordinate desire that makes us jealous of others. Jealousy is deadly. It kills our relationship with God and our relationships with others. If we are willing to be honest with ourselves, a covetous heart is pretty obvious, but that's the trick part about sin, it keeps us from being honest with ourselves.

Let me give you three tests that will help diagnose a covetous heart. We want to do a little heart diagnostics this morning. This is the spiritual equivalent of running on a treadmill and hooking you up to a EKG monitor. If one of these tests is true of you, be careful, if two are true, then take warning, but if all three are true of you then drastic action is needed in your life.

A. Test 1 - Resentment

The first test is resentment, a dissatisfaction of God's allotment of things. Are you unhappy with your lot in life? Do you feel shortchanged? Do you feel you deserve something more? What is your attitude toward what you already have. Are you content with your possessions, your career, your spouse, that you are grateful to God for them, or do you harbor resentment?

If you can't be content with what you have, then that is a warning sign that your heart is vulnerable. It reminds me of a story about Abraham Lincoln. Abe was walking down the street with his two young sons, both of whom were acting up. A passerby asked, "What's wrong with your boys?" Lincoln replied with his usual wit, "Exactly what is wrong with the whole world, I have three walnuts, and each boy wants two." Neither boy was happy with what they were going to get. If that's true of you, be on guard. It can come back to get you.

It did for my dad. He told me of a time growing up when his family was having pork chops for dinner. Before their dad even said "Amen" on the mealtime prayer, my dad's brother, Bill, sprang into action spearing his fork into the biggest, thickest, juiciest pork chop and retrieving his kill to his own plate. My dad immediately began to complain about how Bill always got the biggest piece. My grandparents rewarded my dad's covetous heart with the ultimate end of his

desire. Dad had to eat every single pork chop that night.

B. Test 2 – Time

The second test is time. What do you spend your time thinking about? What fills your thought life? The answers to these questions can be quite revealing. Usually the things you desire most take of the majority of your thought life. What desires does your mind entertain the most?

This test is important, because desires have a way of eventually working themselves into deeds. Your true desires can't be hidden forever. It's like the preacher who dropped in unexpectedly on a church family. The mother, wanting to make a good impression, said to your young daughter, "Honey, why don't you go and get the Good Book that mommy loves so much." The little girl ran off into the next room and returned moments later with a big smile carrying mom's steamy romance novel.

C. Test 3 – Rejoicing

Now we come to the third test – rejoicing? How well are you at rejoicing with others? Are you happy when someone else gets good news, or are you secretly jealous? Are you able to celebrate someone else's success with them, or do you feel bitter, cheated? Do you secretly feel that it should have been you? If we can't rejoice with others, this is a danger sign that our heart is threatened by covetousness.

There is a Burmese legend of a potter who became extremely jealous of a washerman's profitable trade. The potter's jealousy led him to persuade the king that if the washerman was so good, he should be able to take one of the king's elephants and wash it so well that it would become white. But when the king made the request of the washerman, he replied that according to the customs of his trade anything he washed must be in a vessel. So the king instructed the potter to make a vessel in which the washerman could wash the elephant. The potter made the biggest washpot he could, but, of course, as soon as the elephant stepped inside, it crumbled into a thousand pieces. Many times the potter tried to make a suitable container, and many times he failed. Eventually, the potter's covetousness only destroyed his own business.

III. Combating A Jealous Heart

How do we combat a jealous heart? It's not a matter of doing the right thing, because we are dealing with attitudes, not actions. Too often when fighting sinful desires, we think the problem is desire. We think the answer is just getting rid of the desire.

But the answer is not in killing desire. God made us desirous creatures. Remember, desire is not in itself wrong. God himself is a jealous God. We just have to desire the right things. The solution is not a matter of killing desire, but of directing it.

We must focus our desires on good things. Make desire your ally instead of your enemy. C.S.

Lewis said it well when he said our problem is not that we desire too much, but we desire too little. We set our desires too low. We have our hearts set on the petty trinkets of earth instead of the vast riches of heaven. Psalm 37:4 makes an amazing promise. God promises to give you the desires of your heart. "Wait a minute! There has to be a catch." Okay, you got me, but check this verse out. It's worth memorizing, "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart." God promises to satisfy the desires of our heart if we just desire the right things.

God tells us in Col. 3:2 to, "*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.*" Notice He doesn't just say "Don't set your minds on earthly things." We could never do that. We must set our desires upon something, so he says, "Set your minds on things above." Learn to enthusiastically desire the things of God.

How do we weigh the desires of our heart? When weighing the desires of your heart, compare three things.

A. Gods vs. Goods.

First of all, compare gods versus goods. There's nothing wrong with goods, but our goods should never become gods. Whenever you want a good compare it to your desire for God. Is God still in first place? Is he still on the throne of your heart?

B. Wants vs. Needs

After this compare the difference between wants and needs. There is a difference between what we want and what we need. Sin takes over when we turn our wants into needs. Make sure you treat the treasures of God as your needs and trinkets of earth as your wants.

C. Temporary vs. Eternal

The final comparison we should make is between the temporary vs. the eternal. When we desire temporary things more than the eternal, our heart is in the wrong place. When you weigh the desires of your heart, ask yourself, "Is this a temporary thing I desire or an eternal one. Is this something moth and rust can destroy? Is this something thieves can break in and steal? Or is this of eternal value?" We must learn from Paul who writes in 2 Cor. 4:18, "*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*"

Another way of looking at this is what James Dobson calls the end of life test. Imagine yourself on your deathbed. What will matter most to you then?