

The danger and folly of covetousness

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
at Poplar Baptist Church, on 22nd May 2016

Luke 12:13-22

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” ¹⁶And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ ²⁰But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” (ESV)

Introduction

In this passage we learn about the danger of the sin of covetousness. What is covetousness? To covet is to want something badly, so badly that if you do not have it you feel really miserable. It is the opposite of contentment. In this passage Jesus tells us how dangerous the sin of covetousness is, and also how foolish it is. He illustrates this by telling the story of a rich man who had an abundant crop. He planned to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, then to spend many years in

luxury and ease, but he failed to think about his spiritual needs. That night the man's soul was taken from him. He died, and went into eternity with nothing. He had been a fool.

If you are not yet a Christian, this passage speaks to you about how covetousness could lead you to neglect the salvation that God is calling you to receive. So many people spend huge amounts of energy working hard to get money together, and then spend the rest of their energy working out how to spend their money; but they never think about their relationship with God. This passage is a warning about such an attitude.

If you are a Christian already, this passage also speaks to you. We live in an age which is dominated by covetousness. Even when we have been converted and born again, covetousness is a big temptation for us. Those of us who are Christians need to heed the warning that this passage gives against covetousness.

What I am planning to do is to go through the passage more or less verse by verse, and seek to draw lessons from it. We are going to use the English Standard Version (as per the passage quoted above), for the main passage, but the cross references will be from the NIV.

Going through the passage

We start with verse 13, which says, "Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.' "

Jesus had been teaching about how believers are likely to face persecution, and how we are not to worry when we are called to appear before the courts. As he was saying these things, someone interrupted with this request.

It would seem that the man's father had died, and that his brother had taken all of the inheritance, leaving little or nothing for him. We do not know if the man had a valid complaint or not. It is possible that he did. But from what follows, it is clear that Jesus knew that the man's heart was not in the right place. There was covetousness at work in his heart. Jesus took this as an opportunity to teach the crowd about the danger of covetousness.

Let's consider the next verse, verse 14. It says that Jesus replied to the man, "Man, who made me a judge or an arbiter over you?"

Jesus's reply is quite striking, because he *is* going to be the judge of the whole earth, when he comes again. But he refused to get involved in this dispute. His concern rather was to turn people away from sin, and to lead them to truly know God and serve him.

This ties up with what he said to Pilate, as recorded in John chapter 18 and verse 36: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

Jesus's refusal to get involved in this matter is relevant for a discussion which is going on at the present time between believers, about how much the church should be involved in matters of what some call "social justice". There are those who say that the church should champion political causes, and the rights of those who are mistreated. But Jesus steadfastly refused to get involved in any social or political disputes, here or at any other time in his life. We find the same with the apostles. As individual Christians we might feel led to take up different political causes. But the job of the church, as the church, is not to take up causes. The church's job is to preach the Gospel, and to see that Gospel work out in people's behaviour.

Let us move on to verse 15. This says that Jesus said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Notice that Jesus says, "Be on your guard against *all* covetousness". We see from this that covetousness can take many different forms. There are different things for which a person might be consumed with desire for, for example:

- Money itself. A person might want be consumed with desire for money in a miserly way, like Scrooge.
- Possessions. A person might be filled with cravings for possessions that he can buy, or pleasures he can spend his money on, like nights out and holidays.
- To have a beautiful home. A person might be craving for a home which meets the high standards of taste, beauty and good order.
- Food. A person might be consumed and obsessed by a desire to eat food, and consistently therefore eat too much. Or he

might be consumed with a desire to not to be overweight, and eat too little.

- Fame. Some are driven by the desire to be well-known and prominent.

We could mention many other things: desires for pleasure, good health, drugs, sex, alcohol, success in career, power, educational achievement, the desire be married, the desire to have children and the desire for any children one has to do well at school and in a career.

Anything in this world that you set your heart on and desire with excessive desire is covetousness.

The difficulty is that most of these things that people desire are not necessarily sinful in themselves. In fact, many are positively good and helpful. It is good to work hard and do well in your career. It is good to earn money. It is good to be married and have children, and to help your children to do well. Sex within marriage is good. Food is a blessing from God.

So how can you tell when a good and right desire has become covetousness? Here are some tests.

1. Do you spend much of your time thinking and dreaming about this thing, even when you should be praying?
2. Does the pursuit of this thing interfere with the worship of God, especially on the Lord's Day?
3. Do you feel miserable if you do not have it?

Jesus says, "Take care". Watch out. Covetousness is dangerous. Why is it dangerous?

First of all, because covetousness is sin, and all sin is ruinous for us. Covetousness is a breach of the Tenth Commandment. The Tenth Commandment, as recorded in Exodus chapter 20 verse 17, says, "You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's."

It is also a breach of the second commandment, that we should not make an idol and worship it. The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians chapter 5 and verse 5, "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person, [that is, covetous person] — such a man is an idolater — has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." When you

are covetous, the thing that you strongly desire has become your god. Idolaters who do not repent cannot enter heaven.

Even after you have become a Christian, covetousness is extremely dangerous. It is a snare. It brings ruin to a person's spiritual life. The love of things in this world drives out love for God.

Jesus said in Matthew chapter 6 and verse 24, "No-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

The desire to be rich can lead to spiritual disaster. Paul says in 1 Timothy chapter 6 verses 9 to 10,

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Jesus then continues, "For a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Life is not about what you have. It is about having a relationship with God. You can have everything that the world can give, but if you do not have God, you have nothing. On the other hand, if you have God, then even if you have nothing in this world, you are truly rich.

Not only is covetousness very dangerous: it is also foolish. That is what Jesus goes on to talk about with the story of the rich fool.

Consider now verse 16: "And he told them a parable, saying, 'The land of a rich man produced plentifully.' "

The story is about a man who was rich. Being rich is not in itself sinful. There will be people in heaven who were rich in this world. But being rich has particular temptations.

Jesus says that the fields of this rich man produced a good crop. He had a massive harvest. The equivalent for us would be perhaps that a person has a sudden and huge return on his investments. The man was already rich, but now he finds he has a huge amount of resources at his disposal.

Jesus continues in verse 17 “He thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for have nowhere to store my crops?’ ”

Here we find the man’s first mistake: he thought to *himself*. He did not think with reference to God. He did not pray, and did not commit his decisions to God. He did not seek the wisdom that comes from God.

Another mistake he made was that he thought of what he had as his own. But nothing we possess is our own. All things come from God. We are stewards of what God has given to us.

The story continues in verses 18 and 19. “And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ”

He decided, in other words, to save up the wealth that he had, in order to be able, as he thought, to live a life of luxury and ease for years to come. Saving is not in itself sinful. It is not wrong to save, for example, for retirement, or for a major purchase. This can be a responsible and good thing to do.

But, nevertheless, we see that the man made a number of mistakes,

1. He gave no thought to other options for his wealth, such as giving some to the poor, or giving some to the Levites. The Old Testament law commanded that a man should give one tenth of his income to God. But he did not think about these things. He just thought about himself, and his own pleasure.
2. He thought that he could provide for his soul with material things. He said, “I will say to my soul, Soul...” He was imagining that material things can bring satisfaction to the soul. But they cannot. Material things can satisfy the body, but they cannot bring peace and wellbeing to the soul.
3. He thought only in terms of material comfort, and thought that if he could “relax, eat, drink and be merry” then he would have all that he needed. “Let us eat, drink and be merry” is the creed of the unbeliever. It is the cry of materialism. What is materialism? It is acting as though the only thing that counts is what you can see or touch. This is the predominant viewpoint in our world today. Vast numbers of people believe the lie that all there is to life is material satisfaction. They fail to see that there is much more to life than material comfort.

4. He forgot that he had no control over his future. He failed to remember that at any point his life could end.

We then read God's verdict on his actions, in verse 20, "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

God knew what the man was thinking. He knows your thoughts as well.

God said that he was a fool. That night his soul would be demanded of him. In other words, he would die.

The soul leaves the body at death. The soul also leaves all other material things behind. Job said, "Naked I came into the world, and naked I shall depart" (Job 1.21). You cannot take your riches with you. And then your soul goes off to what is known as the "intermediate state", either in paradise with God, or in Hades in torment.

God is then recorded as having said, "...the things you have prepared for yourself, whose will they be?" They will certainly not belong to the man who had been rich, but now had nothing as he went off into eternity.

Jesus then drew the story to a conclusion in verse 21 "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God."

The question this saying begs is this: How do you become rich towards God?

The answer is by receiving spiritual riches from God, by being saved by Jesus, and then by living a new life by the power of the Spirit.

We learn this from the church at Laodicea, which was rich materially, but had nothing spiritually, as recorded in Revelation chapter 3 verses 17 and 18:

Jesus said to this church, "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."

The church thought it was rich, but it did not realise that, spiritually speaking, it was poor. Jesus advised them, "I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich."

What this is talking about is receiving salvation. When a man trusts in Christ he becomes rich spiritually. God gives that man spiritual gold. The riches of God that are in Christ are given to the believer.

And having been saved, we then store up spiritual riches in heaven as we give of our material riches to the poor, and as we serve Christ by the Spirit.

Conclusion

What lessons can we take from this?

1. Stop believing the lie that material things can give you satisfaction, and meet your deepest needs. They cannot.
2. Repent of the idolatry of covetousness. Come to Christ for salvation. God has provided a Saviour, to pay for all your sin. Believe him, and let him change your heart.
3. Having been saved, fight against covetousness. Learn contentment instead. Dwell on the spiritual blessings that God has given you in Christ. Bring your desires to God, and ask him that, if it is his will, you might have them, but submit yourself to his will, and if the answer is “no” then still give thanks to God and be content and thankful to him for his spiritual mercies to you.

This booklet is produced by Poplar Baptist Church, Zetland Street, London E14 6RB, from where further copies may be obtained. Our services on Sunday are at 10.30 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.. You will be very welcome to attend these. The church building is situated on the corner of Zetland Street and the Blackwall Tunnel Approach Road. It is ½ mile south of Bromley-by-Bow underground station, and ¼ mile from Langdon Park DLR station, and the 309 and 108 buses pass the door. If you would like to discuss any spiritual matter arising from this booklet, feel free to contact our Pastor, Henry Dixon, on 020 7001 7776, or enquiries@poplarbaptistchurch.org.

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

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