

August 4, 2019 – Luke 12:13-21 & Colossians 3:1-11

Covet. What does that word mean? I suspect there are a surprising number of people who have no clue what it means. Who have never even heard it before.

The word “covet” has really fallen out of everyday usage. You don't hear people using it in TV shows or the news. Probably because it's kind of a theological term. There's a lot behind the word “covet.” Most of it having to do with things like sin and righteousness and other stuff the world just doesn't understand.

Which is why, if any group had a clue what the word meant, I would hope it's a room full of Christians like yourselves. But even you may not have a precise understanding of it. For example, I think most of you would pin the meaning on something in the line of envy or greed or maybe jealousy.

And those are all pretty close. They might even be in a list of synonyms in a thesaurus. We all understand that covetousness involves a sinful desire for something we don't have.

You can get that much just from the context of the 9th and 10th commandments: *“You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”* Your neighbor has it. You want it. That's wrong. Stop it. Pretty simple.

And if that's the definition you've been operating with all these years, you're not far from the mark and you generally have the gist of it. But, truth be told, there's a lot more to covetousness than just greed. Or envy. Or jealousy.

Jesus addresses this in our Gospel lesson today. We have, in a way, two parables going on here. The first is the real life parable of the man who comes to Jesus with a request. A request that, if you know a bit about Jewish culture, actually reveals quite a bit about his circumstances. He is the younger of at least two brothers. And his father has recently died.

Now, in that day, there was no probate court to ensure a fair division of the estate when someone died. No, instead, when this man died, his eldest son immediately became trustee of his estate. It became his responsibility to divide it fairly and legally with his brother or brothers.

Except, he hasn't. He hasn't done his job as the eldest brother. And this younger brother is getting sick of waiting. So he goes to Jesus for help. Why? Who knows? Maybe the eldest brother was one of Jesus' disciples. Or maybe he just respected Jesus. Or maybe the younger brother is just hoping Jesus can use his clout as a rabbi and a celebrity to get something done. Whatever the case, he rather boldly turns to Jesus for assistance.

In response, Jesus tells him this fictional parable. There's a wealthy man whose farm produces an enormous crop. So much so that there's more than he can possibly sell to the surrounding population.

Now, at this point, he's got two choices. He can sell what he can sell, and then give away the rest to people who couldn't otherwise afford to buy his food at all. Or he can build barns to store the grain. And continue selling it for months and months and months. Squeezing every penny that he can out of every kernel of grain.

He chooses the second option. But before he can even begin construction on the barns, he dies. Why? Is this a punishment for his greed? Well, sort of. But God isn't striking him dead in great judgment and wrath.

No, God simply says, “Look buddy, your soul belongs to me. And if I choose to take it tonight, then I can take it tonight. And guess what? I'm taking it tonight. And there's nothing you can do about that. There's no barn strong enough to keep away death. No barn large enough to reach into heaven. You're done. And all that food you refused to give away? Yeah... it's gonna be given away anyway.”

Now what does this have to do with younger brother's predicament? Well, they're both about men consumed by covetousness. Because to covet doesn't just mean to be greedy or envious or jealous. To covet doesn't just mean to want what you can't have. It also means to want what you can have.

Martin Luther, in his Large Catechism describes covetousness as taking “anything from your neighbor, even though you could do so with honor in the eyes of the world, so that no one could accuse or blame you as though you had gotten it wrongfully.” He says it is the most pious people, the people we are most likely to praise, to call honest and upright, who are the most likely to be guilty of coveting.

Why? Because they get everything they have legally. Which is what both of the men in these stories want to do. The man who comes to Jesus for help is legally in the right. He has the law on his side. His brother is wrong for withholding his share of the inheritance.

Likewise, the man in the parable is legally in the right. He has the law on his side. It's his grain. To do with as he pleases. He can give it away. Or he can store it up. And legally no one can criticize him either way.

Except, of course, for God. Which is the little portion of this Gospel lesson that I've left out. You see, when the man comes to Jesus with his request, Jesus doesn't answer immediately with the parable. No, first he says this: “*Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?*”

Think about that for a second. Jesus. The Son of God. The one who on the last day will sit on a white throne of judgment over all mankind. Is asking, “*Man, who made me a judge over you?*”

But I think Jesus knows how ridiculous that sounds. Because the question behind the question isn't so much, “Who made me judge over you?” but instead, “Who do you think you're talking to?” Do you think you're talking to just another rabbi? Because, if so, I've got no business poking my nose into your little family feud.

But if you believe you're talking to the Son of God, well then... we need to have a little chat. Because when I judge, I judge everyone. I'll judge your brother. And I'll judge you. And you need to take care. You need to be on your guard. Because you are deep in covetousness. Because you believe that your life consists in the abundance of your possessions.

You can eat, drink, and be merry all you want. But tomorrow you will die. Or the next day. Or the next. Or the next. At some point, all that food and drink and enjoyment will amount to nothing. Vanity, as Solomon puts it. Striving after the wind. Chasing... nothing.

Nothing, but death. That's what Paul tells us in our Epistle. “*Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil, desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.*”

Covetousness, which is idolatry. Covetousness, which is bowing down to the things of this world. Covetousness, which is refusing to acknowledge God as the giver of every good gift. And if he hasn't given you this good gift, maybe its not so good for you, after all.

You see, the core of coveting is refusing to be content with what God gives. That rich man who built his barns? He could have been content. He was already rich. God had already blessed him ten times over. He didn't need that money. The younger brother who came to Jesus. We don't know his story. But Jesus did. He could have been content without that inheritance. He didn't need that money.

And you? You could be content. You could stop working all that overtime, and spend some time with your family and your church. You could stop worrying about every penny you earn and every penny you spend and every penny you give to the Lord. You could stop laying up treasure for yourself. And be rich toward God.

You could. But, more often than not, you don't. Because you're a sinner. I should know. I'm one two. And you can train yourself to do good and Godly things. You can train yourself to tithe. And you can train yourself to work fewer hours. You can train yourself to avoid all the things that Paul lists in this passage. And frankly, you should. People who have put away the old self should act like it.

But ultimately, you can't train yourself to be content. No, only your Father in heaven can make you content. Only by looking to things above can you find peace with things below. Only by seeing yourself dead to the world, but alive in Christ can you see the great gift that God has already given you, apart from any worldly blessing. Only by seeing yourself standing with Christ in glory on the last day can you see the futility, the vanity, of chasing after the wind.

Contentment, true contentment, is a gift of God. Because it is found in knowing that He has already solved every problem. He has already judged every crime. He has already found you guilty of covetousness. And He has already found you innocent in the blood of his Son. He has already made you rich in heavenly treasure. And He has already given you a place before His throne.

Contentment is a gift. And it is found at the feet of him who gave up every worldly pleasure. Who gave up his very life. So that you might want for nothing.

We covet that which we can't have. We covet that which we can have. And yet, what matters most of all, is that we've been given more than we can possibly imagine. We've been given more than vanity. More than wind. More than the food and drink and enjoyment, which end at death. For we've been given life after death. Life that never ends. Amen.