

"HEAR YE HIM"

A Devotional Series For Radio

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The Sermon: BEWARE OF COVETOUSNESS

Scripture: Luke 12:13-21

And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you? And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully; And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: 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 thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

Jesus usually taught from life situations. Much of his teaching was prompted by some incident, some question, some need that he observed in the people who thronged about him. His parables, which he used in teaching, were likewise drawn from real life situations.

The incident recorded in today's scripture reading presented an opportunity for his teaching about covetousness. In previous verses of the 12th chapter, Luke has set the stage for what follows. He says that Jesus was speaking to an "innumerable company of people." In the middle of that discourse, one of the crowd interrupted with a request: "Master speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me." Again Jesus followed his rule of being relatively unconcerned about the fine points of legal discrimination. He went beyond all that to the attitudes of mind and heart and spirit, and deducing from the man's rude and hasty interruption that there was perhaps as much wrong with him as with the brother who would not divide, Jesus said, "Beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

This is also another link between Jesus' teaching and the Old Testament law. It is a re-statement of the tenth commandment -- "Thou shall not covet"

which is the only commandment primarily concerned with an attitude rather than an action. It is something that proceeds out of the heart -- an attitude which if allowed to take its natural course can eventually lead to the breaking of all the other commandments, and the commission of almost any crime in the calendar.

Covetousness may not always be sinful. Paul advised the Corinthian saints to "covet earnestly the best gifts;" that is, to desire them, to seek after them, to cultivate them. Every man should covet and see after the testimony that Jesus is the Christ. He should covet those spiritual gifts which he is fitted by nature and disposition to receive -- gifts such as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues Coveting the best gifts will lead to an ambition to achieve that which is good for ourselves and for all men.

One kind of sinful covetousness is to have an inordinate desire for something already possessed by someone else. In the decalogue there is first a very general commandment, not to covet thy neighbor's house. The word "house" means not only the building in which he lives, but his household and all it contains. The neighbor's household includes his wife, his servants, his ox, his ass, or

anything else which he may possess. Modernly, it would include his car, his radio or television set, his household appliances, his new home complete with mortgage, his clothing, his stocks and bonds, his bank account.

This kind of covetousness is apt to be the sin of the poor man who sees the wealth of others and envies them -- who persuades himself that in justice they should share with him. This kind of covetousness leads a man to desire and expect something for nothing, to demand enjoyment without effort. This kind of covetousness demands -- as did the man who interrupted Jesus' discourse -- that the inheritance be divided. It demands that the wealth be shared, but it is not willing to share the sweat and toil and tears which must be expended to produce that wealth. It is such covetous poor men who are condemned in this language from modern revelation: "Woe unto you poor men, whose hearts are not broken, whose spirits are not contrite, and whose bellies are not satisfied, and whose hands are not stayed from laying hold upon other men's goods, whose eyes are full of greediness, who will not labor with their own hands!"

Such covetousness can lead to almost every crime in the calendar, for as Paul wrote to Timothy, "The love of money is the root of all evil." It can lead to such sins of the mind and spirit as anger, envy, resentment, and hatred. Covetousness for another man's wife leads to adultery. Covetousness for another man's house, his money, his car, or his property leads to deceit and lying, theft, dishonesty, and even to murder. Covetousness is a prelude to backsliding and apostasy, for it is a form of idolatry -- a setting up of something which demands more of our worship and allegiance than we give to God.

A poor man who wants to work, but is denied work by an economic system that is out of joint, is apt to be desperate and unreasonable about the fine distinctions of property rights. A poor man whose meager reserves have been exhausted by disaster or chronic illness is almost driven to covet the goods of those who have more than they need. Part of the fault for this sort of covetousness lies with the man who covets his own wealth to the point where he is unwilling to share it with those in need. It is possible for us to covet something which we legitimately possess. This is another variety of sinful covetousness. The man who tore down his old barns and built new

ones had not oppressed or robbed or cheated anyone. God had been good to him, and had given him abundant crops. Instead of regarding that abundance as a God-given means of helping those who were poor through no fault of their own, he decided to hoard it for himself. Like the poor men who covet the rich man's wealth, he wanted to live without work -- to take his ease -- to eat, drink, and be merry. This kind of covetousness is doubly wrong, for it touches off a responding covetousness in others.

Covetousness of one's own legitimate possessions is also idolatry -- the setting up of Mammon in God's place. It is a forerunner of selfishness, of callousness, of narrowness, of indifference to the needs of others. It tends towards oppression, injustice, exploitation, and sharp practices. It is possible for the man who covets his own legitimately earned and legitimately owned wealth to become so obsessed by his wealth that he gains the whole world, but loses his own soul.

Another kind of covetousness is a covetousness for something that neither we nor anyone else as yet owns or has achieved. Without some unrealized, unsatisfied desires, and a will to achieve them, there would be no progress. Because someone in the past coveted and desired that which had not yet been achieved, and worked for it, we have today the blessings of freedom, of constitutional government, of education and learning and culture, the blessings and benefits of science, invention, and medicine. Such covetousness may bless many and harm none. When properly used, the blessings which result from such covetousness can be shared by all, and they draw no man from God. But it is also possible to become so obsessed with a desire for a relatively unimportant thing that we are led to neglect each other and to forget God. This then becomes a sinful covetousness.

"Take heed, and beware of covetousness, for a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." Things are important, but not all important. Wealth is essential -- at least enough wealth to maintain life, health, and efficiency. But few of us need as much as we want. All of us need to take heed, and beware of covetousness. All of us need to learn to be content with such things as we have. Peace and contentment are not dependent on the number of things or the amount of wealth we possess, but covetousness is an attitude that shuts men out of the kingdom of God.

