

Apologia Talks

Coveting: The Ninth Commandment

By Jennifer Probst

Introduction

It is hard to be content when the world around us is constantly encouraging us to want what we do not have. Every day, we are bombarded with advertisements promoting the latest and greatest thing. Add to that the opinions of the wealthy, the famous or our loved ones to further tempt us to not be satisfied. In a world that judges people on the things they possess, how do we as Christians find contentment?

Scripture Connect

To read Paul's story in Scripture is quite amazing. His tale is what television drama strives to provide for its audience. Talk about a case of a complete lifestyle change. Yet where audiences long for a true rags to riches story, Paul's journey goes from man of great status to the bottom of the social chain. While the world longs for material gain, Paul finds contentment in a life with little to call his own. Here are his thoughts on the matter:

"But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:6-10, ESV)

"But [God] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, ESV)

"Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:11-13, ESV)

In the glimpses of what we see of Paul's life, found in Scripture, we discover a man who has had the opportunity to experience quite a lot. Paul found brothers in Christ in every class and station. Throughout his lifetime, each situation made him recognize that life, health, prosperity or the lack of these things are tools that demonstrate how God continues to provide for all of our needs. The things we have may not include the things that we dream of, the things that we want or the things that others possess, but it is exactly what we need to live, grow and receive a saving faith. For Paul, all he needed was God. Once God took center stage in his life, Paul knew that God would take care of everything else.

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:25-33)

Doctrinal Quotation

While it may not feel like it, the act of coveting hurts people. First, the person who covets hurts himself or herself. Here are some thoughts from Martin Luther:

“For we are so inclined by nature that no one desires to see another have as much as himself, and each one acquires as much as he can; the other may fare as best he can. And yet we pretend to be godly, know how to adorn ourselves most finely and conceal our rascality, resort to and invent adroit devices and deceitful artifices (such as now are daily most ingeniously contrived) as though they were derived from the law codes; yea, we even dare impertinently to refer to it, and boast of it, and will not have it called rascality, but shrewdness and caution.” (297-298, Luther’s Large Catechism)

Coveting hurts the individual because it deprives that person of true happiness. To always be in a state of want is not a quality way to live. The constant desire for something more or something we do not have leaves us feeling empty and never satisfied. As our constant thoughts of coveting increase, they give way to plotting and scheming to justify how to get the desired prize. After this, it is only a matter of time before we cross the line and break more than the Ninth Commandment.

The second group of people that coveting hurts are the people who are in possession of the items we desire. Martin Luther had this to share:

“In whatever way such things happen, we must know that God does not wish that you deprive your neighbor of anything that belongs to him, so that he suffer the loss and you gratify your avarice with it, even if you could keep it honorably before the world; for it is a secret and insidious imposition practiced under the hat, as we say, that it may not be observed. For although you go your way as if you had done no one any wrong, you have nevertheless injured your neighbor; and if it is not called stealing and cheating, yet it is called coveting your neighbor’s property, that is aiming at possession of it, enticing it away from him without his will, and being unwilling to see him enjoy what God has granted him. And although the judge and everyone must leave you in possession of it, yet God will not leave you therein: for He sees the deceitful heart and the malice of the world, which is sure to take an ell in addition where-ever you yield to her a finger’s breadth, and at length public wrong and violence follow. Therefore we allow these commandments to remain in their ordinary meaning, that it is commanded, first, that we do not desire our neighbor’s damage, nor even assist, nor give occasion for it, but gladly wish and leave him what he has, and, besides, advance and preserve for him what may be for his profit and service, as we should wish to be treated. Thus these commandments are especially directed against envy and miserable avarice, God wishing to remove all causes and sources whence arises everything by which we do injury to our neighbor, and therefore He expresses it in plain words: Thou shalt not covet, etc. For He would especially have the heart pure, although we shall never attain to that as long as we live here; so that this commandment will remain, like all the rest, one that will constantly accuse us and show how godly we are in the sight of God!” (307-310, Luther’s Large Catechism)

God gives gifts with purpose. In providing gifts, God fulfills His promise to provide for the needs of His creation. In receiving God’s gifts, we can glorify God in the ways that we use them. The gifts that God gives us can be used to share the Gospel message with others. Yet when we covet what God has given to our neighbors and scheme to possess them as our own, we hurt our neighbor and our neighbor’s use of that gift in the way that God intended.

Application

I remember watching television shows and movies that featured superheroes. It was gratifying for me to watch someone protect an individual who was under attack from an enemy. In the Ninth Commandment, we have the opportunity to become superheroes. Our task is to protect our neighbor from those who are trying to trick them or take them away from the gifts that God wants them to have. Unfortunately due to sin, we will need to make sure that we are playing the part of the superhero and not the enemy.

Here is the other part of the superhero shows that I used to watch: they all had some special power that allowed them to help others. We are also given superhero powers. God has given us the Holy Spirit, so that we can go out in the world and accomplish that which He has set in motion for us to do. As superheroes, we join in Paul’s battle cry,

“But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” (1 Timothy 6:11-12, ESV)

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