

Covetousness

1 Tim. 6:10: "Covetousness is the root of all evil, and some in their eagerness to get rich have strayed from the faith and have involved themselves in many troubles."

Covetousness

- Grk. *philarguria*
 - ="love of money";
- Lat. *avaritia*
 - ="covetousness,"
 - ="eagerly desiring possessions and grasping at things or at the honor that comes from having things"

Defining "Covetousness"

- Covetousness is not about what one has or doesn't have.
- Covetousness is about our underlying attitude toward what we have or don't yet have, i.e. the assumptions we make about what money is, means and can do for us.

Like all the seven deadly sins, covetousness involves

- a false understanding of who we really are
- a perversion of love that drives out genuine love.
 - See 2 Tim. 3:2, where "covetous"/"lovers of money" is associated with "lovers of self," but it is clear from what follows that this is a false, sick, abusive self.
 - In 2 Tim. 3:2ff., the perversion of love that comes out of a false, sick, abusive self is also made clear: "proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient...ungrateful, unholy, heartless..."
 - These things work against and drive out genuine love.

More specifically, covetousness is a

- disordered desire to have things and to hold on to what we have
- which leads us to go “too far to acquire possessions and too far to keep them” (Weber, *The Capital Sins*, 46),
 - so that our love/ambition/talent/energy is largely (and increasingly devoted) devoted to getting more of the thing in question,
 - wanting to have more when one already has what is sufficient
 - talk about numbers and acquiring things that begins to displace other types of conversation.
- Covetousness makes me see myself as the one who must provide for me (and guarantee my future security and well-being) by getting things and having things
 - (“I need this...”; “I have to get this...”; “I have to have this...”; “I have to see/experience this...”)
 - Collecting things because one believes this will make one a certain sort of person.
 - One believes one needs to hold on to things tightly to avoid harm and get certain things.
 - If one lets go of one thing, one latches on to something else.
 - Thus, the thing about which one says, “I can’t give it up—I need it” moves from
 - having a large salary to
 - having an extramarital affair.
 - It takes the power of love which God poured out at the Cross to free one from this kind of bondage (which otherwise remains, even when its objects of attachment change).
 - One cannot serve both God and the unending desire for money; only one can be my god.

- See Lk. 16:13: “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon.”
 - Mammon is an Aramaic word that literally means “wealth,” but more broadly it also refers to the honor that comes from having resources.
 - Once this becomes one’s goal, one will be gripped by an unending concern about money, what money could provide, what one might not have if one did not have money.”
- In Lk. 16:14-15, the story continues: “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”
- “I am the Lord your God; you shall not have other gods before me”
 - If having things is something important to me but is not rightly ordered by God, the desire to have those things will be an idol.

➤ Covetousness make me harder toward others

- more unseeing of (and more distant from and indifferent toward) other people and their needs, their problems and their well-being
 - (“I can afford it and it’s my money”)
- less willing to accept obligations toward other people (disordered desire serves itself)
 - If it will cost one something that one doesn’t want to give up, one won’t do it (or will delay doing it and express a desire to get out of doing it).
 - Cf. the two-year old saying, “No, mine!”
 - We hold back things God gives us to share with other people (for example, we hold back a word of insight or encouragement or we are unwilling to take the time to pray with them in an unhurried way).
 - We are more willing to use force (sometimes even violence) ,

- pushing harder (with a harder heart toward people) to get what we want
- being willing to do anything necessary to have (or keep) what we want
 - Cf. Judas' betrayal of Jesus:
 - Jesus gave everything he had in the service of others; Judas sold his master for 30 pieces of silver and allowed him to be brutalized.
 - Compare Mt. 16:26; Mk. 8:36; Lk. 9:25: "What profit would a man get if he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process?"

We tend to think that covetousness is something obvious, like

- Scrooge's extreme stinginess in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* or
- Imelda Marcos' extravagant spending, which reportedly led her to purchase 6,000 pairs of shoes.

Usually covetousness is a much more subtle thing and requires more effort to discern.

- For example, if I am offered a job paying 30% more in another city, but my spouse and children don't want to move, what kinds of thoughts and feelings about having (or not having) things might pass through my mind?
- If I am hoping that my son or daughter will be successful at school or in sports, where does wanting my children to have what is necessary turn into wanting more and more (and basing their [or my] identity on whether they get more and more)?

Effects of Covetousness

- Covetousness draws us away from Jesus and makes us unlike him (2 Cor. 8:9: “For your sake he became poor,” giving up his surplus so that we could have what we needed; the covetous person does the exact opposite, hoarding up more than is right and refusing to let go of it)
- Covetousness turns us away from dependence on God and confidence in God as our Father and our provider, so that we look primarily to ourselves for our future, our security and our well-being.
 - Squirrels know nothing of God and spend the fall hoarding up things, so that they can provide for themselves during the coming winter.
 - If we do not trust that God will provide what we need (or we are afraid that God will provide what we need but not what we really want), we will become like squirrels, running around trying to hoard up things for ourselves, trying to be sure by what we do that we will have everything we want to have.
 - Unlike squirrels, we have a Father we can depend on.
 - If we do not trust him, we cannot receive his peace and will end up becoming consumed by worries because of our false belief that everything depends on us.
 - Contrast Jesus’ words, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Lk. 23:46)
 - It is the small acts of trust that God values the most, our willingness to extend our trust and hope out to him and to receive back from him the grace to do some small act of kindness or generosity toward others.
 - 1 Tim. 6:18: “Let them do good and be rich in good works, giving readily, sharing with others, and thus providing for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, in order that they may lay hold on the true life.”
 - 1 Tim. 6:6-7: “Godliness with contentment is indeed a great gain. For we brought nothing into the world and certainly can take nothing out.”

Prayer of Surrender (Ignatius of Loyola)

TAKE, O LORD, AND RECEIVE MY ENTIRE LIBERTY,

MY MEMORY,

MY UNDERSTANDING AND

MY WHOLE WILL.

ALL THAT I AM AND ALL THAT I POSSESS, YOU HAVE GIVEN ME:

I SURRENDER IT ALL TO YOU,

TO BE DISPOSED OF ACCORDING TO YOUR WILL.

GIVE ME ONLY YOUR LOVE AND YOUR GRACE;

WITH THESE I WILL BE RICH ENOUGH,

AND WILL DESIRE NOTHING MORE.