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GREED AND COVETOUSNESS (2)

Warning against greed and covetousness

In the previous message, we considered a major area of difficulty we are confronted with in this world: greed and covetousness. Let us continue our consideration of this subject by looking at one of the key passages in the Scriptures regarding the problem of the world and overcoming the world.

1 John 2:15-17

15 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

17 The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

In verse 15, the apostle John warns against loving the world and the things in the world. It is clear from this passage that love for the things in the world is negative and is something we should avoid. If we reflect further on this verse, we will see that this warning also covers the area of greed and covetousness.

Greed and covetousness is also highlighted in verse 16. "The lust of the flesh" here refers to strong desires that proceed from the flesh; it is our personal, fleshly desires. A major problem of the lust of the flesh is man's wrongful desires or covetousness for all kinds of things.

Likewise, "the lust of the eyes" refers to the things the eyes see and inappropriately long for. These are things not good for us and we ought not to harbour desires for these things.

Similarly, "the boastful pride of life" can refer to the things that man covets and that will make him take pride in his possessions, whether they be money, big houses, expensive cars or branded clothes. This phrase, "boastful pride of life", literally means "the vainglory of life". According to the Greek Lexicon, this phrase can also be translated as "pride in one's possessions".

In 1 John 3:17, the expression "the world's goods" is used. In the original text, this refers to "the means of life" in this world. This Greek word is at times translated as

“the vainglory of life”. Therefore, we can understand this phrase “boastful pride of life” to mean boasting in relation to one’s possessions and wealth. This is one angle of appreciating this text.

1 John 2:17 sums up the perspective that we should adopt. All the things that mean so much to the people of the world, including many Christians, are passing away. It is only when we learn to abide in the will of God that we will be able to lay hold of things of eternal value, things that will truly abide. Ignoring the warnings of 1 John 2:15-16 will result in dire consequences to our lives.

When does covetousness exist?

If we come across a valuable item or an amount of cash left behind by someone, would we return it to the rightful owner, if that is feasible, or would we keep it for ourselves, if we are sure nobody will know about it?

There are some who will keep it for their own use, if they are certain nobody would know about it. Such people would be considered greedy and covetous and rightly so.

There are also those who would conscientiously return, whether goods or money, to the rightful owner. They would not lay hold of anything by improper or unfair means. They are very strict in their observance of this aspect of life and think that they do not have a problem of greed or covetousness. But this may not be true.

Those who keep the things that do not belong to them are not only covetous but are also dishonest. But those who do not have the problem of dishonesty may still be covetous.

Because they seek to lay hold of things by lawful and legitimate means, many believers are not conscious that covetousness exists in their lives. For example, they work hard for a promotion and for a bigger pay packet, thinking that this is being responsible. Furthermore, they think that since everybody is doing it, it must be the proper thing to do.

Believers can be caught up by the expectations and norms in society and be lured into thinking that they are not doing anything wrong. And in one sense, they are right. Their actions are not wrong in the eyes of the law or in the eyes of those around them. In fact, these people may even be commended for what they are doing.

It is true that many of the things we covet may not be wrong in themselves. For example, money and material wealth can be useful to us and God wants us to be good stewards of these things. We may also adopt legitimate and proper means to acquire them. Yet the problem of covetousness may still be present. Why is this so? When is it present and what is the essence of the problem of covetousness?

Covetousness a result of wrongful desires

As God's children, we must see clearly that the problem of greed and covetousness lies with wrongful desires in our hearts and a lack of contentment. When we strive to lay hold of things that God does not want us to have, even if it is all right for others to possess them, it shows that there is covetousness within our hearts. There will also be covetousness within our hearts when we, out of self-gratification and fleshly indulgence, reach out for more than what God wants us to have. However, even if we do not reach out for something outwardly, covetousness may still exist in our hearts if there is the presence of a wrongful desire for what is outside of God's will for us.

Let us be clear that it is always wrong for us to reach out for things God does not want us to have or to harbour wrongful desires for them. This is contrary to the will of God for our lives and will harm our being.

We may at times rationalise the covetousness within our hearts. For example, we may be working hard because we are striving for a higher position or for more financial gains and material wealth. We give our career top priority and channel all our concentration, energy and time to it. Yet we tell ourselves that we are just being responsible and are seeking to realise our full potential. We may eventually get the promotion and material gains we hanker after, but that may not be what God intends for us. It will be detrimental to our spiritual health and walk with God.

Covetousness aggravated by spirit of competition, envy and jealousy

Covetousness can easily be aggravated when one has a spirit of competition or comparison, or a spirit of envy and jealousy. For instance, we may be contented with what we have. But when we see our friends or neighbours having something more than what we have, we become discontented and desire what they have. When we finally possess such things, we find that they have acquired more possessions and we become dissatisfied again. The spirit of covetousness in us will provoke us to be discontented and seek for more and more.

Let us consider another example: the clothes that one wears. Clothes are at times worn to attract attention so that others will commend the wearer on how handsome or pretty he or she looks. A lady may be very pleased with a particular dress because she thinks she looks pretty in it, but when she attends a party wearing that dress and discovers that several other guests are wearing similar dresses, her initial delight in the dress vanishes immediately as she is not able to attract the attention she covets.

Let me further illustrate with the story of two neighbours who habitually practise one-upmanship. Both of them work very hard to acquire material possessions to prove that they are better off than the other. One day, a rich man says to one of them, "I will grant you a wish. You can ask me for anything, including money." The man is very happy and starts thinking of all the things he plans to ask for from this

rich man. But the rich man goes on, "Besides giving you whatever you ask, I will also give your neighbour double the portion that you receive." This man then becomes very disturbed and the desire to ask for anything disappears. Instead he is heard muttering to himself, "Shall I ask for a pain in the neck?"

Covetousness aggravated by fear and insecurity

Covetousness can also be aggravated by a sense of fear and insecurity. Sometimes we covet material wealth because we want to feel more secure as we face the uncertainties of the future.

When people have a surplus and the future looks bright, they tend to feel more secure. Christians in such a situation may think that they are trusting in the Lord. In reality, they could be placing their security in temporal things. Their true state is revealed when they are tested and found to be wanting.

This is an aspect that we need to properly face before the Lord. What is the basis of our well-being and security? Do we have faith in the Lord and in His perfect will for our lives? Are we able to be content with whatever the Lord sees fitting for us to go through, whether it is having much material possessions or going on in life with little of such? We should avoid comparing ourselves with others. The Lord leads each one of us through different paths in life. What He sees as fitting for one may not necessarily be His will for another.

Let us consider a situation where we have two courses of action open to us:

- a. A path that seems to provide comfortably for our needs in the material and financial sense but may be detrimental to our walk with God.
- b. Another course of action that is helpful for our walk with God but involves uncertainties in meeting our material and financial needs.

When we are faced with such a situation, are we able to be truly open to the Lord? Does the Lord have the freedom to speak to us and guide us? For example, will the Lord have the freedom to indicate to us that His will for us is to take the second course of action rather than the first? And when we are clear of the Lord's will for us, will we act on it and trust Him meaningfully and with peace of heart for the outcome?

I say "trust Him meaningfully and with peace of heart" because we may embark on a course of action that as far as we can understand is good for us, yet our hearts may be very troubled. When this happens, when we are not able to respond properly in such a context, it may suggest that there is a deficiency in our faith in God.

Believers do experience difficulty and uncertainty to varying degrees. We may be able to trust God up to a certain point. But when the situation becomes more difficult and trying, we may fail to trust God and begin to act according to our own wisdom.

When that happens, we may be less receptive to the Lord, and God will have less freedom to speak to us and guide us.

Our perception of the quality of our faith and security in the Lord during times of ease and plenty or when not tested, may not be accurate. We may not be as strong and as healthy as we think we are or appear to be. Let us prayerfully look to the Lord for the Spirit of God to search our hearts and see whether we are truly open before Him, not clinging to anything or insisting on having something, but truly prepared for whatever the Lord sees fitting for us, including difficulties that lie ahead. This attitude is important if we want to attain our full potential in the Lord. God must have the freedom to speak to us, deal with us and guide us. Whatever He sees fitting for us to go through or to go without, we will humbly submit to Him. Is this our heart's desire and approach to life?

Let us also beware that it is easy for material wealth to become a snare to us, especially those of us living in affluent countries. When we have plenty, we may become self-indulgent, self-confident and may have a false sense of security. We may also begin, to some degree, to depend on material wealth instead of fully depending on the Lord.

If we do not prayerfully reflect on it, we may not even be conscious that we have allowed such attitudes to creep in. This is not uncommon. Many believers do have a false sense of security and confidence in their possessions rather than having true dependence on God.

Wherein lies our confidence?

Let us heed the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 6:17.

1 Timothy 6:17

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy.

Paul's instructions to Timothy indicate the danger of the rich being conceited because of their wealth. They may think that they are all right even though they have to some degree shifted their dependence on God to dependence on material wealth and have developed a false sense of security and confidence in their possessions.

In this regard, let us learn from the testimony of Job in Job 31: 24, 25, 28.

Job 31:24, 25, 28

24 "If I have put my confidence in gold,
And called fine gold my trust,
25 If I have gloated because my wealth was great,
And because my hand had secured so much;
28 That too would have been an iniquity calling for judgment,

For I would have denied God above.

Verse 28 qualifies all that Job had said from verse 24 onwards. At the time of his speech, Job was in poverty and all his wealth was destroyed. He was recollecting the times when he was rich and had plenty. He knew that if he had placed his confidence in his gold and wealth, and if he had been proud in his ability to create wealth and increase his riches, he would have sinned and committed iniquity. He would not have shown proper appreciation for God because his material possessions would have occupied a place in his heart that rightfully belonged to God.

In our context, what is the reality within our hearts? The reality already exists in our hearts even *before* we are tested. The testing that the Lord permits only serves to confirm the presence of the qualities or deficiencies within. Thus, it is helpful to ask the Lord to help us recognise what we need to do to put right in our hearts so that we will not be found wanting when we are tested. Is material wealth occupying a wrongful place in our hearts? Is our sense of security and confidence in God alone?

Greed and covetousness in spiritual service

Greed and covetousness generally involves money and material wealth. Besides money and material wealth, there are many other areas that we can falter in, for example, seeking for status, power, authority, fame, prestige, recognition and glory. Although there is a place for such things, they are very problematic areas. Believers can easily long for worldly status, power, authority, fame and prestige in a way that is not meaningful. This problem is also present in the context of Christian service.

In the area of spiritual service, when we see people fulfilling certain roles and serving in a certain capacity and we want to do the same even though it is not God's intention for us, the spirit of covetousness is present. If we persist, various complexities and undesirable consequences may follow. Besides harming our own lives, we would also be breeding jealousy and strife, and be a hindrance to God's work.

Paul compares our different roles in the body of Christ to the roles of different parts of the human body. Each part fulfils a role; when one member covets to serve in a role not intended for him, not only does he neglect his assigned responsibility, it also leads to malfunctioning of the body.

Coveting talents and physical attributes

We may also covet other things such as talents or physical attributes. Some people are endowed with a talent for music or art. Some are good in studies or in technical areas. Some have a brilliant mind and are able to think logically. Some are well-built and good looking. We may be envious of these people and covet what they have. We may be unhappy with our constitution, with the aptitudes and talents we are born

with, and we question God, "Why did You create me with so few talents? Why am I not as good looking or as capable as these people?"

Such sentiments are not uncommon. They are unhealthy and are a form of covetousness. When we are dissatisfied with our state and improperly long for these things that others have, our discontentment may spill over to questioning God and being unhappy with God.

Such thoughts reveal that we are not able to rejoice in and be content with what God in His perfect wisdom has seen to be fitting for us. Let us realise that these areas that we are talking about – the context we are born into, our constitution, talents, physical attributes – are *not* moral issues. They do not really matter. What counts is our attitude and how well we are faring and responding within our framework and how well we are responding to God's call and His working in our lives.

Whenever we harbour discontentment, it will always be detrimental to us and a hindrance to our walk with God. We must learn in all things and in all aspects to rejoice in God's perfect will for us and be contented in it. We must recognise that God is the God of wisdom and we should gladly submit to His perfect will for us even though, at times, we may not fully understand His reasons for bringing us into this world and placing us in a particular context. It is feasible for us to respond well in whatever context, and if we do so, it will be well with us.

Beware of passivity

Having considered the dangers of discontentment and the problem of covetousness, we must also beware of "passive contentment", that is, a false sense of contentment or, more accurately, passivity.

Passive contentment means that we think we are contented, but in reality, we are passive, complacent, spiritually lazy, and having a wrong sense of letting go. In such a state, we are not properly exercising ourselves, but instead we just accept things and situations as they are. We are lacking in earnestness in the things of God and in working towards fulfilling God's will and intentions for our lives. We are, in reality, missing out on the spiritual riches God wants us to have in Christ and failing to properly work out His purposes together with Him and His people.

God wants us to have zeal and earnestness and not a false sense of contentment. He wants us to have healthy contentment within the framework of His perfect will. Within this framework, we must strive earnestly to work out His will for our lives, by His grace and together with Him. We do so knowing that these are important issues in life. This is what the Scriptures strongly exhorts us in.

It is not easy to maintain a wholesome balance because, on the one hand, we are warned against being covetous and, on the other, to work hard and be zealous in the things of God. However, the two aspects are meant to exist together in a very

beautiful reality. Sadly, we often fail in both directions, that is, we covet and strive for what the Lord doesn't desire us to have and, at the same time, are passive in those areas that God wants us to work hard at.

In fact the two opposites have a negative impact on each other; for example, when we work very hard to become rich outside the will of God for us, we dull our appetite and earnestness for the things of God. When we neglect spending time with Him in prayer, in Scripture reading, in fellowship with the brethren, and in other areas that are important for our spiritual lives, the world becomes more and more attractive to us and its pull will become stronger and stronger, and we then begin to covet more and more things that God does not want us to have.

Learning from scriptural examples

Let us consider two negative examples recorded for us in the Scriptures.

Ahab

Ahab was a king and he had plenty, but he coveted Naboth's vineyard, thereby incurring God's judgement. 1 Kings 21 tells us that Naboth was unwilling to give up his vineyard because it was an inheritance from his father. Because of Naboth's refusal, Ahab became sullen and vexed and behaved like a spoilt child.

His wife Jezebel plotted the murder of Naboth and then delivered the vineyard into Ahab's possession. The prophet Elijah pronounced God's judgement on Ahab: "Thus says the Lord, "Have you murdered and also taken possession?...In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs will lick up your blood, even yours" (v. 19).

God's judgement of Ahab in the context of his coveting Naboth's vineyard shows us the seriousness of covetousness in the eyes of the Lord. But it should also be borne in mind that, as a whole, Ahab's life was evil. He did terrible things and caused Israel to turn away from God.

Gehazi, servant of the prophet Elisha

2 Kings 5 records that Naaman sought Elisha's help to heal him of leprosy. After Elisha healed him, Naaman presented him with gifts of silver, gold and clothes. But Elisha responded, "I will take nothing." Naaman urged him to accept the gifts, but he still refused. However, Elisha's servant Gehazi coveted the gifts that Elisha rejected and he said, "I will run after him and take something from him." He lied to Naaman that Elisha had sent him and Naaman gave to him two talents of silver in two bags and two changes of clothes that Gehazi then hid from his master.

When Elisha asked Gehazi where he had been, he lied, "Your servant went nowhere." But Elisha was aware. He said, "Did not my heart go with you, when the man turned

from his chariot to meet you?" And he continued, "Is it a time to receive money and to receive clothes?" Then he pronounced judgement on Gehazi, "Therefore, the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever." Immediately, Gehazi became a leper.

There was nothing wrong with the clothes and the silver in themselves, but it was improper for Gehazi in that context to long for these things and lay hold of them in that manner. Gehazi should have known better but he failed and Elisha did not shield him from judgement.

Likewise, as God's children, we must be careful not to be presumptuous of God's love and grace toward us. If we are presumptuous and covet things we should not have, we would also experience outcomes that are detrimental to our lives.

Dealing with covetousness – learning to be contented in God

If we do not deal decisively with greed and covetousness in our lives in whatever degree it is present, it can ensnare, ruin, destroy and cause us to go astray from the faith. Just the area of the love of money is sufficient to destroy us. Let us learn from what Paul has to say on this subject:

1 Timothy 6:5-12

5 and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain.

6 But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment.

7 For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.

8 If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.

9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.

10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.

12 Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

In verse 5, Paul is referring to people with negative attitudes, who have a spirit of envy and strife, who think that they can advance their personal ambitions in the path of spiritual godliness. Paul continues in verse 6: "But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment." It is right for us to pursue godliness, but it must be accompanied by a spirit of contentment. This would result in great

gain. Paul goes on to explain in verse 7 that those looking for the wrong kind of gain must realise that at the end of their lives, they are unable to take these things out of this world. But when there is true godliness accompanied by contentment, we will be content with the basic necessities of life (v. 8) and we can have true freedom in the Lord.

But if there is covetousness in our hearts and we want to get rich, we can easily fall into temptation, which can plunge us into ruin and destruction (v. 9).

Verse 10 tells us "the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil". This truth is illustrated very clearly in the history of mankind. Many lives have been destroyed because of greed and covetousness. This problem is faced not only by non-believers, but also those who profess faith. Some believers who longed for these things "have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs". No wonder Paul tells us to "flee from these things...and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness" (v. 11). He went on to urge us to "fight the good fight of faith" (v. 12), because beyond the money and things that attract us, it is spiritual warfare and the evil one is using these things to tempt, ensnare and destroy us!

The real answer in the end has to go beyond being contented with the things that God provides, to finding our contentment and fulfilment in God Himself. It is when we seek God Himself that we can enter into a life of true contentment and fulfilment in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is then that we can gladly accept whatever the Lord sees fitting for us to have or not to have. It is in such a context that we will be able to respond deeply to God and to earnestly and zealously work out God's purposes together with Him.

Concluding remarks

We recognise that greed and covetousness is harmful to our lives. Let us therefore look to the Lord to help us see where it exists in our lives and be very determined to deal with it before it destroys us. Let us not cling on to greed and covetousness.

It is said that in Africa, one can catch monkeys by tying a container filled with nuts and other edible items to a tree. The container that is used has a sufficiently big opening for a monkey to put its hand in to reach for the delectable morsels placed inside. When a monkey clutches the nuts with clenched fists, it is unable to withdraw its hand. If the monkey is willing to let go of the nuts, it will be able to withdraw its hand easily. However, the monkey will not let go of the nuts, and so it will be caught.

Similarly, if we refuse to let go of our wrongful desires for the things of this world, we will lose our freedom in the Lord, and the Lord will not have the freedom to work deeply in our lives. We will be hindered from attaining to the fullness of life that the Lord intends for us.

Let us grow in oneness with God and be more and more identified with what is in His heart. Let us learn to let go of all the things that the Lord does not want us to have and learn to be fully contented in His perfect will, knowing that His perfect will is the best for us. When we live in this way, we will be free from the problem of greed and covetousness and the Lord will have true freedom to work in and through our lives. May this be true for each one of us.

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