

On Covetousness

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Being Gouge's own summaries of his sermons on Covetousness
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On Covetousness

Of the Nature of Covetousness

Covetousness is an immoderate desire of riches. The apostle implies as much under this phrase, *boulomenoi ploutein* 'they that will be rich', 1 Tim. 6:9; under that word 'will', a desire (and that unsatiabable desire) is comprised. The notation of both the words before mentioned, namely, 'love of silver' and 'desire of having more', do demonstrate that covetousness consists in a desire.

Desire of riches is not simply covetousness, for a man may lawfully pray for them. So much is intended in the fourth petition [of the Lord's Prayer]. Now what a man may pray for, he may desire with the same limitations as he may pray for it. Therefore it is an immoderate desire: that is, when a man is not content with that portion which God by his providence in a lawful and warrantable course does afford unto him, but (according to the apostle's phrase) he will be rich; he will have more than God allows him in a fair way; and if he cannot otherwise get more, he will be discontent.

The general object of covetousness is riches. Under this word all the commodities of this world are comprised and withal abundance of them, yea, more than is necessary. Things necessary may be desired, but not superfluity, Prov. 30:8. This sin is especially in the heart. One may have little, and yet be covetous; and one may be rich, and yet free from covetousness.

Of the Practice of Covetousness in Getting Wealth

Covetousness is practiced three ways:

1. In getting.
2. In keeping.
3. In spending what a man hath.

When wealth is gotten unconscionably or immoderately, it is a sign of a covetous heart. That is said to be unconscionably gotten which is gotten against any duty whereunto conscience is bound, as:

1. Against any particular precept. Therein Achan covetously transgressed, Josh. 7:21.
2. Against piety; as they which buy and sell on the Sabbath Day for gain, Neh. 13:16.
3. Against justice; as Ahab, who by Naboth's unjust death got his vineyard, 1 Kings 21:19.
4. Against charity; as the rich man that took the poor man's sheep to entertain his friend, 2 Sam. 12:6.
5. Against equity; as Gehazi, who got that which his master refused, 2 Kings 5:20.
6. Against truth; as Ananias and Sapphira with a lie kept back part of that

which was devoted to the church, Acts 5:2.

7. Against all these; which was Judas his sin in betraying his Master for thirty pieces of silver, Matt 26:15.

Whatsoever is by force or fraud, by stealing, lying, or any other indirect course gotten, is an effect of covetousness. It argues an over-greedy desire. If it were not so, no means would be used but that which is lawful; and in the use of them men would depend on God, and be content with that portion which he by his providence affords them.

An immoderate getting is when men spend their wit, pains, and time in getting the goods of this world, and rather than fail, lose their meal's meat, and sleep, and other refreshments, yea, and neglect the means of getting heavenly treasure: they are only and wholly for the things of this world. If spiritual and temporal blessings cannot stand together, temporals shall be preferred and spiritual neglected: as the Gadarenes, for fear of losing more swine, prayed Christ to depart from their coast, Mark 5:17; and they who, for their farm and oxen's sake, refused to come to the Lord's supper, Luke 14:18, etc.

Of the Practice of Covetousness in Keeping Wealth

Covetousness in keeping wealth is practiced two ways:

1. When men hoard up all that they can, though they have enough for the present, yet fearing want [lack] for the future, treasure up whatsoever

they can get. So did the rich fool in the Gospel. His ground bearing fruit plentifully, his mind was presently set upon enlarging his barns to lay up for many years to come, Luke 12, etc. The wise man does set out this covetous practice, 'There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he has neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labor; neither is his eye satisfied with riches,' Eccl. 4:8. These are they that take thought for the morrow; that is, care and care for the future time, which Christ expressly forbids, Matt 6:34. They think that whosoever want [lack], they will not.

2. When men hoard up only for themselves, they care not what treasure for the future the commonwealth or the church has against times of need and trial, nor do they care for the flock of the poor.

Of the Practice of Covetousness in Spending

A covetous practice in spending is manifested two ways:

1. By spending too sparingly and too niggardly in all things, as when men live under their degree and place, when they regard not decency in apparel or other like things, when they afford not necessaries to themselves or to those that are under their charge: these are pinch-pennies. Thus does the wise man set out such a one, 'A man to whom God has given riches, wealth, and honor, so that he wants nothing for his soul of all that he desires: yet God gives him not power to eat thereof,' Eccl. 6:2.

2. By being too prodigal in some things, as in housekeeping, in apparel, in

their pleasures on themselves, wives, and children, but are too strait-handed in all works of charity, and in contributions to church and state. Nabal was such a one. He made a feast in his house 'like the feast of a king,' but yet refused to refresh David's soldiers in their necessity with any part of his provision, 1 Sam. 25:11,36. And such a one was Dives [the rich man]; he 'clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day,' yet refused to feed Lazarus with the crumbs that fell from his table, Luke 16:19, etc. These may be counted pound-prodigal, and penny-covetous.

Of the Heinousness of Covetousness

There are many circumstances concerning covetousness which do much aggravate the heinousness thereof, for:

1. It is a deceiving sin; it blinds the understanding and corrupts the judgment in a main point of happiness: for the covetous man 'makes gold his hope, and fine gold his confidence,' Job 31:24. This is further manifest by the titles that are usually given to it, as 'substance,' and 'goods.' They who get much wealth are said to be made for ever; and they who lose much, to be undone for ever. The rich man, when his corn exceedingly increased, thus said to his soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry,' Luke 12:19. Upon this conceit of happiness, wealth so steals away a man's heart, and so inflames his affections, as he makes his god. Justly therefore is a covetous person called an idolater, Eph. 5:5; and covetousness idolatry, Col. 3:5.

2. It is an unsatiable sin. 'He that loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loves abundance with increase,' Eccl. 5:10. In this respect covetousness is like a dropsy, which increases thirst by much drinking; and like a fire, which by addition of fuel is the more fierce. The desire of a covetous man arises from abundance, and in that respect is unnatural; for nature is satisfied with sufficiency. Hunger and thirst cease when a man has eaten and drunk that which is sufficient.

3. It is a galling sin; it works a continual vexation, and takes away all the comforts of this life. The apostle says, that 'they which covet after money, pierce themselves through with many sorrows,' 1 Tim. 6:10. There is a threefold woe that accompanies covetousness: 1. A woe of labor and toil in getting wealth; 2. A woe of care and trouble in keeping it; 3. A woe of grief and anguish in parting with it. Nothing makes death more unwelcome than a covetous desire of the things of this world.

4. It is an ensnaring sin. 'They that will be rich, fall into temptation and a snare,' 1 Tim. 6:9. Wealth, as it is a bait to allure men to snap thereat, so it is a snare fast to hold them, and a hook to pull them down to perdition. 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!' Mark 10:23. This snare kept the farmers from the wedding feast, Luke 14:18,19. It keeps many from the word; yea, it steals away the heart of those that come to the word; for 'their heart goes after their covetousness,' Ezek. 33:31.

5. It is a mother sin. 'The love of money is the root of all evil,' 1 Tim. 6:10. Fitly therefore does the prophet thus style it 'evil covetousness,' Hab. 2:9. There is no evil which a covetous man will forbear. His covetousness puts him on to all evil. It is a root of impiety. It draws the heart from God, so as there can be no true love nor fear of God in a covetous heart. It makes a

man be of that religion which is professed in the place where he lives, though it be palpable idolatry. A covetous man can swallow all manner of oaths, yea, and perjury itself. For gain he will profane the Sabbath. It makes inferiors purloin from their superiors, and superiors to neglect their inferiors. It is a cause of much rebellion, of many treasons, murders, thefts, robberies, deceit, lying, false witness, breach of promise, and what not.

6. It is a growing sin. The longer men live in the world, the more covetous they use to be after the world. Old men are commonly the most covetous. Herein it differs from other violent sins, which by age abate in their violence.

7. It is a devouring sin. 'The deceitfulness of riches choke the word,' Matt 13:22. Covetousness is like Pharaoh's lean cows, 'which did eat up the fat cows; and when they had eaten them up, it could not be known that they had eaten them; but they were still as ill-favored as at the beginning,' Gen. 12:20,21.

8. It is a crying sin. 'The cries of them which are oppressed' by covetous persons 'enter into the ears of the Lord.' Hereupon an apostle bids them 'weep and howl,' James 5:1, etc. Covetousness causes a curse from man and God. 'He that withholds corn' (as the covetous man will when he can), 'the people shall curse him.' As for God's curse, 'the wrath of God comes upon men because of these things,' Eph. 5:5,6. The apostle reckons 'covetous persons' among those that 'shall not inherit the kingdom of God,' 1 Cor. 6:10.

Of Remedies Against Covetousness

For preventing or redressing covetousness, these rules following are to be observed. The judgment must rightly be informed in these two points: (1) In the nature of true happiness. (2) In the vanity and deceitfulness of riches. Many learned men lack this point of understanding.

1. It is the blindness of a man's mind that makes him place a kind of happiness in the things of this world, whereby he is brought even to coat upon them. If therefore we shall be rightly instructed that happiness consists in matters of another kind than this world affords, and that the things of this world are so vain as they can afford no solid comfort to a man, especially in spiritual distress, and so uncertain as they may suddenly be taken away from men, or men from them, surely their immoderate desire of riches could not be but much allayed. He that said, "There be many that say, 'Who will show us any good?' O Lord, lift You up the light of your countenance upon us," Ps. 4:6, well discerned the difference between earthly and heavenly blessings. So did he who said, 'Riches profit not in the day of wrath; but righteousness delivers from death,' Prov. 11:4.

2. The will and heart of man must follow the judgment well informed, and raise themselves up to that sphere where true happiness rests. 'Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth,' Col. 3:2. This will keep the heart from coating on things below; for 'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,' Matt 6:21. A beast which is feeding in fair and fresh pasture will not stray into a bare and barren heath; much less will an understanding man, that finds the sweetness of spiritual and heavenly blessings, feed upon earthly trash. This made Paul account all

outward things but dung, because his heart had tasted of the sweetness of Christ, Phil. 3:8, etc.

3. A man's confidence must be placed on God and his providence. God's providence is an overflowing and ever-flowing fountain. The richest treasures of men may be exhausted; God's cannot be. Be therefore fully resolved of this, that 'God will provide,' Gen. 22:8. This casting of our care on God's providence is much pressed in Scripture, as Ps. 55:22; 1 Pet. 5:7; Matt 6:25,26, etc. By experience we see how children depend on their parents' providence. Should not we much more on our heavenly Father? This resting upon God's providence is the more to be pressed in this case, because nothing makes men more to misplace their confidence than riches. 'The rich man's wealth is his strong city,' Prov. 10:15.

4. Our appetite or desire of riches must be moderate. Herein be of his mind who thus prayed, 'Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me,' Prov. 30:8. This is the main scope of the fourth petition, Matt 6:11. Be content, therefore, with that portion which God gives you, and be persuaded it is best for you. This lesson had Paul well learned, Phil. 4:11. Contentedness and covetousness are directly opposite, as light and darkness. The apostle here in this text opposes them.

5. We must pray against covetousness, as he who said, 'Incline my heart unto your testimonies, and not to covetousness,' Ps. 119:36. We ought the rather to pray to God against it, because it is a hereditary disease, and in that respect the more hardly cured. It was one of Christ's greatest miracles to cure one that was born blind, John 9:32.

Of Well-Using Abundance

In case God by his providence give abundance, as he gave to many of the patriarchs, to Job, David, Solomon, and others, great care must be taken about well-using the same. For that end let these rules following be observed. Some of them are negative and some affirmative.

Negative rules are such as these:

1. 'Abuse not the world,' 1 Cor. 7:31. By the world is meant the things of the world: all manner of earthly commodities. These are abused when they are esteemed above that for which they were given: when they are preferred before spiritual and heavenly things.
2. 'Set not your heart on riches if they increase, Ps. 62:10. Delight not too much in them.
3. 'Trust not in uncertain riches,' 1 Tim. 6:17. Do not so place your confidence on them, as if happiness were to be found in them.
4. 'Let not the rich man glory in his riches,' Jer. 9:23, nor be puffed up by them. There is nothing in them to make a man proud of them.
5. Let not your wealth move you to scorn the poor. This is it which an apostle taxes in rich men, saying: 'You have despised the poor,' James 2:6.
6. Let them not occasion you to oppress others. The foresaid apostle implies that rich men are prone here unto, where he says, 'Do not the rich oppress you?' James 2:6. The rich man that took his poor neighbor's lamb, to entertain a traveller, oppressed him, 2 Sam. 13:4.

Affirmative rules are such as these:

1. 'Honor the Lord with your substance,' Prov. 3:9. So order the goods of this world which God gives you, as with them you may maintain the service of God and promote piety.
2. Be 'rich in good works,' 1 Tim. 6:18. According to the abundance which God has given you, abound in works of charity. He that had five talents gained thereby five other talents, Matt 25:20.
3. 'Make friends of your riches,' Luke 16:9. They are made friends when they are so used as they may be evidences, and thereby give testimony of our piety, charity, justice, and other like graces.
4. Seriously and frequently meditate on the account that men are to give of using their wealth. We are not lords of our riches, but stewards; and a steward must give an account of his stewardship, Luke 16:2. That which the wise man says to the young man, may be applied to a rich man, 'For all these things God will bring you into judgment,' Eccl. 11:9.
5. Be ready to let go whatsoever God shall be pleased to take away. Of this mind was he who, when he had lost all that he had, thus said, 'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord,' Job 1:21.
6. Trust in the Lord. This advice does the apostle give to rich men, 1 Tim. 6:17, for this very end: to draw them from trusting in riches. He does therefore thus infer the one upon the other, 'Trust not in uncertain riches, but in the living Lord.'

Of Examination of a Man's Self About Covetousness

Covetousness being such a sin as has been declared, in the nature, practice, and heinousness of it, it nearly concerns every Christian to consider how far it has seized on him, and how guilty he stands thereof. This duty lies on every one in these especial respects:

1. Covetousness does especially consist in the inward desire of a man, which is best known to himself. A man's desire is one of the things of a man which no man knows, 'save the spirit of man which is in him,' 1 Cor. 2:11.
2. It is so hereditary a disease, as no man is altogether free from it. It will in some degree or other be found in the best, if they thoroughly sift themselves. Certainly he found himself addicted thereto who thus prayed to God, 'Incline my heart unto your testimonies, and not to covetousness,' Ps. 119:36; yet he was 'a man after God's own heart,' Acts 13:22.
3. It is so deceiving a sin, covering itself under the veil of prudence, providence, good husbandry, thriftiness, harmlessness, and sundry other presences, as if it be not thoroughly examined, it will hardly be discerned.
4. It is so eating, fretting, and consuming a sin, as if it be not searched out, but suffered to lurk and grow, it may prove like the thorns which soak out the heart of the earth, and make the seed fruitless, Matt 13:22. The heart of many that frequent the word 'goes after their covetousness,' Ezek. 33:31. This covetousness in the heart of a professor may prove like the wild gourds that were put into the pot of pottage, 2 Kings 4:39,40; and like that

accursed thing that was by Achan brought into the camp of the Israelites, Josh. 7:11.

5. Many, for want of thorough trying of themselves in this case, think better of themselves than there is cause. The Pharisees were covetous, yet they thought too highly of themselves, Luke 16:14,15,18.

Of Rules to Find Out Covetousness

It is in vain for any to search after that which he knows not how to find out. God himself having exhorted Joshua and the elders of Israel to search out the accursed thing that was hid in the camp, gave him advice and direction how to do it, Josh. 7:13,14. I hold it meet, therefore, here to add a direction.

1. Observe the inward wishes of your heart. If they be especially for the things of this world, they argue a covetous disposition. Covetousness is styled 'the lust of the eye,' 1 John 2:16; that is, an inward inordinate desire arising from the sight of such and such a thing, Josh. 7:21. Many things may be seen which are not desired, but if desired, and that inordinately, there is covetousness.

2. In things which differ, mark what is preferred. If earthly things be preferred before heavenly, temporal before spiritual, that disposition is covetous. Such was the disposition of those who are invited to the king's supper, and refused to go, Luke 14:18, etc., and the disposition of the Gadarenes, Mark 5:17.

3. In the means of getting, consider whether they be just and right, or no; for all unjust and undue ways of getting, arise from covetousness. A mind free from it will rest content with that portion which by the divine providence shall be allotted, Jer. 22:17; Micah 2:12.

4. Compare with the stint which you first set to yourself, the issue that follows. If upon the obtaining of the first desire, a man remain unsatisfied, and his desire be more and more enlarged, he has a covetous heart. For example, a poor man thinks if he could get ten shillings a week, it would serve his turn; he has it, but then he desires ten shillings a day; he has that also, yet is not satisfied; from shillings his desire arises to pounds, and yet is not satisfied. These are such of whom the prophet thus speaks, 'Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth,' Isa. 5:8. Such a one is said to 'enlarge his desire as hell,' Hab. 2:5.

5. Well weigh the effects of your desire of riches. If thoughts thereupon break your sleep and care thereabouts consume your flesh, and labor and toil therein take up all your time, and impair health and strength, that desire is immoderate: it is plain covetousness, Eccl. 2:23 and 5:12. This argues a greediness after 'filthy lucre,' as the apostle terms it, 1 Tim. 3:3.

6. Take notice of your disposition in hoarding up and keeping wealth and sparing to spend it; for covetousness consists as much (if not more) in keeping as in getting. The rich man in the parable herein especially manifested his covetousness, Luke 12:19. The Lord, therefore, for avoiding covetousness, forbids from laying up treasures on earth, Matt 6:19.

7. Observe your manner of spending. If it be too sparingly, niggardly,

and basely, if under your degree and means, if against health and strength in general, not affording what is needful thereunto; or against special occasions, not affording physic or other requisites in sickness, or help of surgery in case of wounds, sores, or other maladies; or against the charge that belongs unto you, as wife, children, servants, kindred, and neighbors; or against the duty and due which you owe to the poor, state, and church; or in what you do in any of the foresaid kinds, you do perforce so as otherwise you would not of it, surely this kind of spending savors rank of covetousness, Eccl. 4:18.

Of Over-Rash Censuring Others of Covetousness

Covetousness being a heinous sin and exceedingly disgraceful to the profession of the true faith, we ought to be very tender about laying it to the charge of professors. It cannot be denied but that many professors are too guilty thereof: yet withal it cannot be denied but that many others are too rash in censuring professors. It may be that to lay covetousness to one's charge will not bear an action in our courts of justice, but in God's court of justice it may prove a matter of condemnation.

Men may more safely judge themselves hereabouts than others. For covetousness is an inward inordinate desire; and a man may better know the kind and qualification of his own desire than of others, 1 Cor. 2:11.

The grounds which, ordinarily, men have of judging professors is suspicion or surmise, to which the apostle gives this attribute: 'evil,' 1 Tim. 6:4; for surmises are evil in their quality, and in their effects. Ordinary surmises are

such as these:

1. Such a man is very industrious and painful in his calling: he rises early; he sits up late. Answer: It may be that a good conscience about employing and improving his talent to the best advantage he can puts him on to that diligence, and not covetousness.
2. He lives not according to his estate, but much under it. Answer: You may surmise his estate to be greater than it is. Do you know all his losses, all his debts, his manifold charges, and several ways of laying out?
3. He is not liberal to the poor. Answer: He may be prudent in well ordering his charity; and conscionable in observing this rule of Christ, 'When you do alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand does,' Matt 6:3.
4. He lays up much. Answer: You cannot tell what part of his estate he lays up, nor to what ends. The apostle prescribes it as a duty belonging to parents to lay up for their children, 2 Cor. 12:14.

Of Contentedness. What It Is.

Contentedness is a satisfaction of the mind concerning the sufficiency and fitness of one's present condition. This general matter of contentedness, a satisfaction of mind, does not only put a distinguishing difference between contentedness and covetousness, but also shows that they are diametrically contrary one to another: for a covetous mind is never satisfied with any estate:

and a contented mind is never unsatisfied with any.

This satisfaction is accustomed to accompany such things as God bestows on such as He takes special care of. Such persons having long life are satisfied therewith. God with the blessing gives satisfaction, Ps. 91:16. 'The meek shall eat and be satisfied,' Ps. 22:26. God 'will satisfy the poor with bread,' Ps. 132:15. When God promises to send corn, wine, and oil as a blessing, it is added, 'you shall be satisfied therewith,' Joel 2:19,26.

This satisfaction is said to be of the mind, to show that it extends itself as far as covetousness does; which is an inward inordinate desire of the mind. A contented person does not only forbear outward indirect courses of getting more and more; but does also restrain the motions of his mind or soul, from desiring more than God is willing to allot unto him.

The sufficiency mentioned in the description has not reference to any set quantity or measure which the contented person propounds to himself; but only to the wise providence of God, who does give to every one of his what is sufficient for him: answerably a contented person so accounts his own estate, and is satisfied. She that made this answer, to him that would have spoken to the captain of the host for some reward to her, 'I dwell among mine own people,' was such a contented one, 2 Kings 4:13.

This word fitness is added, to show that contentedness extends itself not only to the things which are needful for man's livelihood, as food and raiment, 1 Tim. 6:8, but also to the several estates s hereunto man is subject: as of peace and trouble, ease and pain, honor and dishonor, prosperity and adversity. Contentedness makes a man account that estate, be it joyous or grievous, whereunto God brings him, to be the fittest and seasonablest for him.

The present condition wherewith a contented mind is limited in this text admits a double reference. One to the time past: wherein though his condition has been better, yet he repines not at the alteration thereof. The other reference is to the time to come: wherein though he have never so great hope of bettering himself, yet for the present he remains content with his present condition.

Of the Grounds of Contentedness

The grounds of contentedness are such as follow:

Knowledge of God's disposing providence; that He orders all things in heaven and earth, according to his own will, Ps. 115:3 and 135:6. Hence we may safely infer that our estate, whatsoever it be, great or mean, plentiful or scanty, quiet or troublesome, is ordered by God. 'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away,' Job 1:21. 'I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things,' Isa. 14:7. Who would not, who should not, be content with that estate which God provides for him?

The End