

How To Kill Relationships and Irritate People

“Never Be Satisfied”

Ephesians 5:1-5

Mark Vroegop

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. 3 But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. 4 Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. 5 For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Over the last four weeks we have learned the some great truths from the Bible and applied them to relationships:

- God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.
- The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.
- Resolve conflict quickly or you will give the devil an opportunity.
- Learn to speak redemptively.

It has been wonderful to look at life through the lens of the Scriptures. This series has been a bit like surgery – painfully helpful. And I just want to encourage you to keep growing in this area of God-glorifying, Jesus-centered, Spirit-empowered relationships. Take the next step and use this series not as an end but as a beginning.

There are three things that we are working on to help you take the next step:

1. We are offering a Big Group Class (ABF) on the book *The Peacemaker* beginning September 6
2. We would love to have a few small groups continue discussing these issues, and our Small Group team has some resources for you to use
3. I hope to put these sermons into an e-book format that we will have available by the end of September

Now next week we'll resume our "Get Real" study in Matthew 7 with a message on judging but today we are wrapping up this series by talking about the subject of covetousness or discontentment.

Holy Discontentment

The problem that many of us face is the fact that we are content with things which we should be discontent and we are discontent where we should be content. Spiritually, this misplaced contentment is dangerous. The Bible calls to a holy discontentment with our spiritual condition (Philippians 3:13 – "...forgetting what lies behind and straining for what lies ahead"), and content with our lot in life (Philippians 4:11 – "...I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content").

Ephesians 5 begins with a call for spiritual growth and maturity in light of putting on the new self (see 4:22-24). That calling includes a discontentment or a yearning to become something more. The list includes the following:

- Be an imitator of God (5:1)
- Walk in love (5:2)
- Take sexual immorality, impurity, and covetousness seriously (5:3)
- Don't spoil relationships with filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking (5:4)

In other words, a new person in Christ is discontent with the right things. It means that you are discontent about how much you are imitator of God, how much you walk in love, and the sinful things in your life. In other words, holy discontentment means that you are intolerant when it comes to sin and spiritual stagnation. Contentment in Christ means a spiritual discontentment.

Paul aims to create an urgency in our hearts over certain issues, and that is why he talks so strongly in Ephesians 5:5 - *"For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."*

The problem with sexual immorality, impurity, and covetous is the fact that they are too easily tolerated. We are comfortable with immorality, justify impurity, and we are content with our covetousness. And Paul wants us to see that covetousness is very serious, even indicating that to be characterized by it means that you do not have an inheritance in Christ. In other words, it is dangerous to your soul to be content with covetousness.

Content with Covetousness?

Covetousness is a familiar sin, but it is far more complicated and dangerous than what we often realize. Getting a grip on our contentment with covetousness means that we have to understand why it is so devastating. Let me give you three reasons:

1. It always wants more

To be covetous by definition means to desire more. In Ephesians 5:5 the word translated as covetous means eager to have more or a yearning for what belongs to others. It is a desire for more of anything. The last of the 10 Commandments says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's" (Exodus 20:17). In the New Testament, it is particularly applied to material possessions - "And he said to them, Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

The opposite of covetousness is contentment, and the Scriptures call us to embrace a mindset and a lifestyle that reflects control over our desire for more – "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb 13:5).

Covetousness, by definition, is always out for more. One more, once more, just another will never be enough. And we have to see this for what it is: a familiar trap laid by the enemy.

2. It is a worship problem

Now that last phrase in Hebrews 13:5 – "I will never leave you nor forsake you" – is really important, and it relates to the second reason why covetousness is so devastating. The opposite of covetousness is living in the reality of knowing that God will never leave us or forsake us. Do you remember what Paul said about covetousness in Ephesians 5:5? He said, "who is covetous (that is, an idolater)." Paul is intentional with adding that thought. He links covetousness to idolatry. The real issue with covetousness or a lack of contentment is **misdirected worship**. Therefore, there is a clear connection between our relationship with God and covetousness.

Covetousness is connected to worship in that it places security, joy, and satisfaction in something other than God. So covetousness is a worship problem that expresses itself through a desire. In other words, objects of worship always demand more. With God, that is a good thing. With other things – like money, possessions, popularity, status, attractiveness, power, etc – it is a terrible sin. The problem is not just desire; these objects take over, control us, become function gods. It is false worship. And we need to see this for what it really is.

3. It is a belief problem

In light of this, here is how I would define covetousness: **believing that what you have in and through God is not as satisfying as what you could have in and through something else**. So the problem with covetousness is that it believes that what God is and what he has supplied is not as satisfying as something else. John Piper says "covetousness is

desiring something so much that you lose your contentment in God. Or: losing your contentment in God so that you start to seek it elsewhere.”¹ In other words, covetousness betrays God by believing that there is something more satisfying than who God is or what he has supplied.

Therefore, the underlying challenge with covetousness is what we really believe. Is God sufficient or not? Will he meet our needs? Is he truly satisfying? Can we really be happy in him? Covetousness is a heart divided between two Gods.² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his commentary on Ephesians 5:5 makes the following comment:

It does not matter what it is, anything that you and I tend to set up as the big thing, the central thing in our lives, the thing about which we think and dream, the thing that engages our imagination, the thing that we live for, the thing that gives us the biggest thrill; if it is anything other than God, it is idolatry.³

Can you see why covetousness is taken so seriously and why Paul links it to idolatry in Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5? Covetousness is a devastating sin, and it specifically relates to our relationship with God. A lack of contentment is my attempt to run my life; it makes my expectations, desires, and wants pre-eminent over God's. Covetousness makes me god!

The Danger of Covetousness to Relationships

Now I have said nothing about relationships yet, and that is by design. You will never understand how discontentment affects relationships until you really understand what is at the core or at the heart of this issue. Covetousness is similar to pride in that it is sneaky and subtle, often in the background. It is silent and deadly.

There are real effects of covetousness on relationships:

1. It drains the soul

Relationships were designed by God, and they only work when we do them God's way. A right relationship with God is the foundation of a right relationship with others. You have to be God's kind of person **before** you can be God's kind of partner or parent. You have to be God's kind of person to be ready for a significant relationship or deal with hard people or to pursue reconciliation. Covetousness drains your ability to do that.

¹ John Piper, *Future Grace*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishing, 1995), 221.

² Ibid

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light – An Exposition of Ephesians 4:17-5:17*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1982), 340.

Covetousness chokes out the influence of God in your life. In the parable of the sower, Jesus describes one of the soils this way: "but the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the *desire for others things* enter in and choke the word" (Mark 4:19). There is a direct connection between the life of your soul and covetousness. Things, stuff, money, promotion and a host of other things compete for our hearts. And when they usurp God, they erode the foundation of everything. Covetousness drains the soul. You lose sensitivity to God and others.

2. It is never satisfied

The book of Proverbs gives us the following warnings: "The leech has two daughters; "Give" and "Give," they cry" (Prov 30:15), and "Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied and never satisfied are the eyes of man" (Prov 27:20). There is a real danger here that you can live your life with a constant orientation toward more. Now this is implicit in the definition of covetousness but you need to see how it can affect relationships.

Let me give you an example of this from Ed Welch's book *When People are Big and God is Small*:

Marriage has been a privilege and blessing to me. It has also been the context for a surprising discovery. I found that being okay in Christ was not enough for me. When I was first married, I knew that Jesus loved me, but I also wanted my new wife to be absolutely, forever smitten with me. I needed love from her. I could handle small amounts of rejection from other people but I felt paralyzed if I didn't have the love I needed from her. If she didn't think I was a great husband, I would be crushed (and, as you might guess, a little angry).

This led to a second awakening. I suddenly realized that I mutated into a walking love tank, a person who was empty on the inside and looking for a person to fill me. My bride was, indeed, gifted in being able to love, but no one could have possibly filled me. I think I was a love tank with a leak.

Since those days I have spoken with hundreds of people who end up at this same place: they are fairly sure that God loves them, but they also want or need love from other people – or at least they need something from other people. As a result, they are in bondage, controlled by others and feeling empty. They are controlled by whoever or whatever they believe can give them what they think they need. It is true: what or who you need will control you.⁴

Covetousness doesn't have to be just about money or stuff. It relates to anything that you want. And it is devastating to live with someone or try to have a relationship with someone who is never satisfied. They try different jobs, cities, churches, friends, cars, hairstyles, clothes and lovers because they are always looking for something more. And they end up destroying everything in their yearning for more. Covetousness is the treadmill that never stops.

3. It is at the core of conflict

⁴ Edward Welch, *When People Are Big and God is Small*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1997), 13.

The third devastating effect relates to conflict. Covetous people frequently have conflicts because their insatiable desires inevitably are resisted by others. "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel" (James 4:2). This passage is so clear!

The reason for fights and quarrels is because of hindered desire or unrealized covetousness. We want what we want, and we are will to do just about anything to get it. The problem is not the conflict; that is just the fruit. The real problem is covetousness.

- We want to be liked; so we become resentful or bitter when we get forgotten or overlooked
- We want people to think we are good parents; so it is embarrassing when our kids mess up
- We want to be popular; so it makes us angry or hurt when we aren't on the guest list
- We want to be respected; so we exaggerate or look down on others

The problem is in what we desire, and if you are not careful covetousness will kill our relationships.

4. It gives rise to more sins

Listen to the warning in 1 Timothy 6:8-9 - "But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. 9 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." Covetousness creates senseless and harmful desires; it plunges people into ruin and destruction. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Your covetousness had led into bondage. You wanted something more – the corner office, more money, a bigger house, a fancy car, a better body, a man who understands you, a woman who meets your needs, a drug that makes you feel better – and you have seen that the desire for leaves so much destruction in its wake.

Covetousness is never static. It demands to be fed, and once you start feeding it – it is hard to stop. The desire for more creates so many other sins because you will do just about anything to get what you want. And one day you will wake up and say, "What was I thinking!"

Discontentment and covetousness are dangerous to relationships. Trying to love someone who is a leaking love tank is painful, hard, and exhausting. It is like trying to fill swimming pool one glass of water at time.

Conquering Covetousness: A Sufficient Savior

I don't want to leave you with only the devastating news about covetousness. I want instead to point you to Jesus Christ who is the only one that is really able to meet the needs of your heart. Receiving him for the forgiveness of our sins brings true contentment to the soul.

The ultimate solution to covetousness is to a greater satisfaction in God through a personal relationship with Jesus:

"...be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb 13:5).

"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil 3:7-10).

"Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 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. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:11-13).

College Park let us learn how to be discontent with our discontentment. Let us yearn, even covet, for freedom from covetousness. Let us be satisfied in God so that our relationships do not become the vain attempt to fill a God-sized hole in our hearts with tooth-pick sized solutions.

Covetousness destroys our relationships and our own souls in a relentless search for fulfillment in all the wrong things. You will never be satisfied with anything unless God is satisfied **with** you and you are satisfied **in** God through Jesus.

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