

COME NEAR TO GOD

Covetousness. Also known as Greediness. Envy. Insatiability. What's mine is mine, and what's yours should also be mine. Such an attitude is a no-no according to the tenth and last commandment. You shall not covet.

Don't covet your neighbor's house—not even if it has an ocean-view, a stunningly beautiful backyard and all the closet space you could ever need.

Don't covet your neighbor's spouse, no matter how good looking your neighbor's spouse is, or if you just had a terrible fight with your spouse, or your spouse put on twenty or thirty pounds and some wrinkles over the years.

Don't covet your neighbor's slave. Okay, that one's easy to keep. How about, don't covet your neighbor's housekeeper; or maid service; or babysitter?

Don't covet your neighbor's ox or donkey. Again, we probably don't have to worry about breaking that particular commandment. But how about, don't covet your neighbor's Mercedes Benz convertible? Or their new riding mower?

Then, in place of all the things God didn't list—perhaps for the sake of brevity—the last sentence of Commandment Ten acts as a catch-all. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor. Nada. Nothing. Zilch.

I guess you could put a positive spin on the Tenth Commandment by stating, “You shall be content with what you have. When you think about it, covetousness is very childish. It's immature. I once read a humorous piece in some magazine about how children view ownership. A child's rules for what belongs to them includes statements like: “If I was holding it five minutes ago, it's mine.”

“If I think it's mine, it's mine.”

“If I saw it first, it's mine.”

“If it looks just like one that's mine, it's mine.

“If I want it, it's mine.”

In the epistle reading that we heard this morning, James addresses Christians in general and warns against having such a childish, self-centered, jealous attitude—the attitude of covetousness.

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your

desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you can spend what you get on your pleasures.”

Here’s my summary, in a few words, of what I think James is trying to say. The heart, the essence, the core of sin and misery is, “I want. . . .” Well, let me clarify. The heart, the essence, the core of sin and misery is, “I want, and what I want is contrary to or opposes what God wants.”

What tends to happen when what I want is contrary to or opposes what God wants is that I want to change gods; or change God. I want to shape God into my image and likeness so that God wants the same things I want, instead of shaping my life into God’s image and likeness so that I want what God wants. And that, by the way, breaks the very first of the Ten Commandments, in which God declares, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Which includes the “small-g” gods we call money and material possessions.

The only “god” we’re to worship and serve is the One True God. And, as Jesus once said, you can’t have two masters. You can’t serve both God and money. It’s one or the other. To covet wealth and material things is to put God in second place. And not only that, but coveting wealth and material things often leads to unfortunate results. Like inner turmoil. Bitterness. Quarreling and fighting. And even, in some cases, murder.

Coveting often begins as an ambiguous inner desire for something that somebody else has; and it can grow into a full-blown rebellious attitude in which we emphasize and place our own will and wants ahead of God’s will and wants.

That kind of attitude, James argues, is the catalyst, the force, the propellant behind all sin. James called such an attitude a wisdom that comes from below. In other words, it’s a devilish, a demonic wisdom. Which means it’s actually no wisdom at all. A covetous attitude is a very foolish and unwise attitude because of the pain and harm it causes, over things that are merely temporary and impermanent. So, instead of a covetous attitude over worldly things, James urges us to embrace a different way—he calls it “the wisdom that comes from heaven.” And indeed, it does sound very much like what I imagine heaven to be like.

Pure. Peace-loving. Considerate. Willing to put the needs and desires of others ahead of ours. Performing merciful, kind and considerate deeds. Not a trace of apathy or insincerity. If all human beings were like that, wouldn’t you consider this planet to be heaven on earth? I know I would. Like the prayer Christ taught us states: “Thy will—God’s will—be done on earth as it is in

heaven.” When what we desire is in accordance with God’s desire for us, and when the way we live is aligned with God’s way and God’s will, then heaven on earth will become a reality. Or at least begin to become a reality. And if it’s not possible for the whole world to be heaven on earth, James says; if it’s beyond our power and our capability to make that happen, then at the very least we should strive to make the church like that.

As the church, the Body of Christ, we’re to give the world a taste of heaven on earth. We’re to show people what God’s realm is like. We’re to let them see the way true citizens of the Kingdom live and act and treat one another. A way that’s much different than that of the world.

James offers a very simple diagnosis of the world’s problems and troubles. If you want to avoid the ills of conflict and disputes, bitterness and violence that originate from the sin of covetousness, “submit yourselves to God. Resist the Devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.” And that is perhaps the best, most effective way to lead ourselves out of covetous impulses and behavior. Draw near to God and God will draw near to us.

If God feels far away, go to the places where you have encountered God before and felt close to the divine presence. Do the things that you know will move you in God’s direction. Hang out with the people who hang out with God and who hold God near and dear in their lives. Some specifics of drawing near to God might be the usual kinds of things I’ve mentioned many times before: attending worship; reading and reflecting on the Bible; carrying on a regular and active prayer life; listening to sacred music and hymns; the sacraments; getting a little more involved in this church community we’re a part of; and finding fellowship and friendship in our faith community. I’m sure there are other things that could be done to draw closer to God, but the things I just listed would make a great start.

So, yes. By all means, draw near to God. Fill your life, your mind, your heart and your activities with desiring—even coveting—God’s way, so there won’t be any room left for coveting your own way or coveting what belongs to your neighbor.

Could it really be that simple and obvious?

I think so. But as I’m sure you know, “simple and obvious” doesn’t necessarily mean “easy and effortless.” Inevitably, we’re destined for a lifelong struggle between our covetous, self-serving human desires and our call to follow Christ. And I think that’s why we need the community of the church. Because if you and I want to become more godly, it helps to be in the midst of others like ourselves who are also striving to be more godly.

Church is a place where we receive encouragement and inspiration to stay focused on the goal of Christ-like living. Church is a place where the aim, the number one goal, is to draw near to God, and let God to draw near to us.

You know, in my years as a parish minister, I've had a number of people say to me words to the effect, "I don't need to go to church. I can get in touch with God in nature by going on a hike in the woods, or climbing a mountain, or looking out at the ocean." My response to such claims is simple. "Yes, you probably can get in touch with God and draw near to God in nature; but do you?" When you're hiking in the woods, or climbing a mountain, or looking out at the ocean, how much time, if any, do you spend even thinking about God—let alone worshipping God or drawing near to God?"

And a follow-up question I would ask is, "Can you find fellowship and support from a community of believers who are striving to draw near to God like you are, when you hike in the woods, climb a mountain, or look out at the ocean?" What I leave unspoken is my own personal answer to those two questions. Which is, "I very much doubt they do." And that's why I strongly believe that the faith community we call the church—and our regular participation in it—is essential to our efforts and desires to draw near to God and have God draw near to us.

My friends, there's no mystery or magic to what James is telling us this morning. Covetousness, greediness, envy, an insatiable desire to serve and please ourselves at the expense of others, is wrong. It's devilish, foolish and destructive behavior. It's at the heart of all sin. It leads us away from God. And when we grow distant from God, from God's way and from Christ, God's Son, trouble and disaster often follow. But when we come near to God, to God's way and Christ, God's Son, God will come near to us and peace and harmony will follow. And the church helps and encourages us do that.

Come near to God, or wander off and grow distant from God. It's our choice to make. May God grant us the wisdom that comes from heaven so we will make the right choice. Amen.