

Battling the Unbelief of Covetousness

by John Piper

The way to fight sin in our lives is to fight unbelief in our hearts, and the way to pursue righteousness is to pursue faith.

Duration: 33:29

Scripture: Psalm 46:1, Psalm 119:36, Matthew 6:33, Colossians 3:5, 1 Timothy 6:6, Hebrews 13:5

Topics: "Contentment", "Covetousness"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of contentment and warns against the desire for wealth. He highlights that the love of money is the root of all evils and can lead people astray from the truth. The preacher encourages believers to focus on righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness, and to fight the good fight of faith. He urges listeners to put to death covetousness and to be content with what they have, trusting in God's promise to never leave or forsake them. The sermon concludes with a warning that covetousness can ultimately destroy the soul.

Transcript

Text this morning from God's infallible Word is found in the epistle of 1st Timothy. If you've brought your Bible from home, please use it now. Turning to chapter 6 of that letter and beginning at verse 6. 1st Timothy chapter 6 verse 6. There is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.

But if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils.

It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the truth and pierced their hearts with many pangs. But as for you, man of God, shun all this. Aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.

Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. The goal that I have for this series of messages on battling unbelief this fall could be stated like this.

I want us to have fixed permanently after this fall permanently in our minds this truth. The way to fight sin in our lives is to fight unbelief in our hearts. The way to fight sin in our lives is to fight unbelief in our hearts.

Or to put it positively, the way to pursue righteousness in our lives is to pursue faith in our hearts, or to fight the fight of faith as Paul calls it here in verse 12. Now, I want to begin by reminding you of three reasons why I set myself this goal for our church and for our congregation. The first reason comes from Hebrews 12, 14, which says, there is a holiness without which we will not see the Lord.

I really believe that. There is a practical daily lived out righteousness without which nobody gets into heaven. Which means, according to Matthew 7, 23, that Jesus will say to some professing Christians on the judgment day, I never knew you.

Depart from me, you workers of iniquity. Even though they said, Lord, Lord, we did many mighty works in your name and went to church every Sunday. He dismisses them as evildoers because they did not have the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

It also means that there are many church-going people who believe that they are saved because they once prayed to receive Jesus, not realizing that the proof of the genuineness of that prayer is perseverance in faith and holiness. And so, Jesus said in Matthew 24, 13, he who endures to the end will be saved, not those who endure halfway to the end and then abort faith. And Paul said to believers, professing believers in Romans 8, 13, if you live according to the flesh, you will die.

So, my first reason for this series is that I believe my ministry would be a failure if you came to this church 5 years, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, and then went to hell for all eternity because you never learned to fight the fight of faith and lay hold on eternal life. That's reason number one. Reason number two for this series is that I might succeed in persuading you that there is a holiness without which you cannot see the Lord, only to have you throw yourself into pursuing it in a way that backfires on you and destroys you.

The Bible makes it very clear that there is a way to pursue righteousness that leads to hell. And the Pharisees were good at it. I get this from Romans 9, 31, which says, Israel, even though she pursued the law of righteousness, did not attain that law.

Why? Because she did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works, which it isn't. Never was, never could be, never will be by works that any man attains under the righteousness called for in the law. It is to be pursued by faith.

There is a holiness without which we will not see the Lord, but if you try to pursue that holiness by works, you will not arrive. You must pursue holiness by faith. If you would ask me, well, what is works? So I can be sure to abstain.

Here's the way I would define works. Works is the pursuit of holiness unempowered by faith in the satisfying, liberating promises of God. Let me say it again.

Works is the pursuit of holiness, the warfare of righteousness unempowered by faith in the liberating, all satisfying promises of God. We simply must learn how to live by faith. We must learn to fight by faith.

We must learn to attack sin by faith. We must learn to pursue holiness by faith, for there is a holiness without which we will not see the Lord, but you can pursue that holiness on a way that leads to destruction. That's my second reason for trying in 13 messages to teach how to live by faith.

And the third reason is because I want to glorify God and I want you as a church to glorify God. And I know from Scripture God is only glorified when he is trusted. God gets glory in our moral and our religious pursuits only when they are performed in a reliance childlike upon his promises.

He gets no glory when we show our independent strength to do right things. There's a lot of pagan moral people in the world from whom God gets no glory at all because they're not resting in God's grace for the performance of their morality. And I don't want any part of any morality that gives not God the glory.

Let me let Martin Luther speak here. This is Reformation Sunday and he says it so well. Faith honors him whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard since it considers him truthful and trustworthy.

There is no other honor equal to the estimate of truthfulness and righteousness with which we honor him whom we trust. Martin Luther, absolutely right. And my goal, my third reason for preaching this series is that I want God honored.

I want God to be honored more than I want anything else in all the world. I want God to be honored and God is only honored when we trust him. And therefore, we must battle unbelief.

And therefore, this morning, we must battle the unbelief of covetousness. So our focus this morning, and I hope you can see that all I'm doing all fall is preaching the same message every Sunday, illustrated with 13 different sins, just to get across one point. The pursuit of holiness that leads to heaven is the pursuit of faith.

That's all I want to say in every message this fall. Only say it in such a way that you catch on to how to fight every different kind of temptation by fighting for faith and against unbelief. Let's go at covetousness this morning.

In our text, in 1 Timothy 6, I believe we have a very clear definition of covetousness, even though the word is not used, I know that, but the reality is all over the place in this text. And we have a description of the battle against covetousness as a battle of faith or a battle against unbelief. So let's take those one at a time and point that out from the text.

First of all, the definition of covetousness, I'm going to draw it out of verses 5 and 6. The situation here in verse 5 is that there's some people in the community who are evidently cashing in on godliness somehow. Maybe they're putting out some really juicy albums of evangelical pop music or something, I don't know. Evangelicalism is big business in America today, multi-billion dollar business.

And evidently, it had its roots way, way back. Some people here were considering godliness a means of gain, worldly gain. Now, Paul is going to play with some words here and cash in on their words with verse 6. And he says, there is great gain in godliness with contentment, with contentment.

Now, here's my definition of covetousness on the basis of that verse. Covetousness is desiring other things so that your contentment in God diminishes. Covetousness is a loss of contentment in God with a corresponding rise of desire for other things besides God.

And they work in proportion inversely. As contentment in God decreases, the effort to find satisfaction in the world increases. And that transaction is called covetousness in the Bible, like that.

That's covetousness. Paul, in Colossians 3, 5, calls it idolatry. Let me read this to you.

Put to death what is earthly in you, immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Have you ever thought that the 10 commandments begin and end with the same commandment? Almost. I'd never thought about this until yesterday.

The first commandment is, thou shalt have no other gods before me. And the last commandment is, thou shalt not covet, which Paul then defines as idolatry. Beginning to put your affection or find your satisfaction in something besides God.

They're the same command, almost. Well, what we see then with regard to this definition is that coveting is a desiring of something to the diminishing of our contentment in God or a loss of contentment in God with the corresponding rise of trying to be satisfied with something besides God. Now, what Paul is trying to do in these verses, 6 through 12, is persuade people.

That's what I'm trying to do this morning. Persuade people not to be covetous. To fight that reality that shows its ugly head in our heart and somehow kill it and get rid of it.

That's the goal of these verses and that's my goal this morning. But I want to make sure you see the nature of the warfare here very clearly. In verses 6 to 10, he gives reasons for why it would be foolish to be covetous.

Then in verse 11, he tells Timothy, run from it, flee from it, shun these things, this love of money and this desire to be rich, this covetousness. And then in the second half of verse 11, he puts it positively. He says, instead of that, pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, steadfastness, love, and gentleness.

And then notice what he does in verse 12. He picks faith to highlight and says, fight the good fight of faith. Now, if you collapse verses 10 to 12, just collapse them down and get the essence, what you get is this.

Don't be covetous, fight for faith. And so, the battle against covetousness is a battle against unbelief. That's what comes clear as you just see the flow of the argument in these verses.

And this is one of the clearest proofs, by the way, that the way to obey the Ten Commandments, one of which is thou shalt not covet, the way to obey the Ten Commandments is by faith. Don't let anybody ever tell you that the Ten Commandments were intended to be obeyed by or as works. The Ten Commandments are the fruit of faith.

That comes straight out of this text because of covetousness being taught or being fought with faith. All right, we've got a definition. We've got the essence of the warfare as being a battle against unbelief or a fight for faith.

I want us to see now that the definition and the nature of the battle are more closely related than we at first might think. What I'm going to say is that this contentment in God, which is the opposite of covetousness, is faith. Here's my argument for that.

In John 6.35, Jesus says, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst. Now, how would you define faith on the basis of that verse? He who believes in me will have the thirsts of his heart assuaged.

I would define faith like this. Faith is an experience of contentment in all that Jesus is for me. Faith is an experience of satisfaction, heart satisfaction, in all that Jesus is for me.

If that's true, then it's the opposite of covetousness, because covetousness is what rises as contentment in God diminishes. So when we say that fighting covetousness means fighting for faith, it's so obvious because the very definition of faith implies it. Faith is resting in God, finding contentment in God, being satisfied with all that Jesus is for us, as the yes and amen to all God's promises.

And so don't take any other attack on covetousness other than the fight for faith. That's all it is. We fight for faith when we fight against covetousness.

Well, now, what do we fight with? And the answer, of course, is the weapons of faith, which mainly are the Word of God. Romans 10, 17 says, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God or by the Word of Christ. So if you want faith, that is, if you want the experience of contentment in all that Jesus is for you, you listen to the Word of God telling you about how delectable all that Jesus is for you is.

And if you turn away from the Word of God, you will be deceived in falling for the apparent delectableness of alternatives to God in the world. There is only one way to sustain faith, which is a contentment in God, and that is listen, listen, listen, listen to God's description of how surpassing is the worth of Jesus Christ. Now, when you listen, God gives you two kinds of weapons against unbelief and against covetousness, therefore, warnings against the folly of covetousness and promises that are so desirable that they can evaporate covetousness.

So I want to look at those in turn. Let's first look at the warnings, some of which will come from this text, some I'm going to take from elsewhere. I have five warnings against covetousness.

Number one, covetousness never brings satisfaction. Ecclesiastes chapter 5, verse 11 says, he who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with gain. This also is vanity.

So there's the Word of God this morning. If you love money and desire to be rich, God promises you you will be dissatisfied. That's the promise of God.

You will be dissatisfied if that's your life aim. Jesus put it like this, beware of all covetousness for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. Life is not having.

Life is being. Life is on the inside. Life comes out.

You don't get life from things no matter what they are. Covetousness does not satisfy. Warning number two, covetousness chokes spiritual life.

Covetousness chokes spiritual life. You remember the parable? Of the soils. Jesus says there's a man went out to sow.

He sowed on four different kinds of soils. Soil number three, the seed fell among thorns. And then he comes and he interprets the soils and he says that the seed is the Word of God, which begins to take root and bring forth some kind of spiritual life and then thorns choke it.

What are those thorns? Here's his word. The cares of the world and the delight in riches and the desire for other things. That's covetousness.

The desire for other things enter in and choke the Word and it proves unfruitful and there is no holiness then without which we will not see the Lord. You see, there's a battle going on right now as you're listening to me. I am sowing the Word of God and you are a soil.

And I know that many of you came into this room with desire for other things besides God. And therefore, there are many thorns in your life. And therefore, the seed of my Word right now is falling.

For some of you, that thorn of desire for some other thing is just quickly wrapping around it and your mind is shooting off to another place. It's shooting off to a relationship. It's shooting off to dinner.

It's shooting off to money. It's shooting off to sex. It's shooting off to something at work.

And Satan is hard at work every time the Gospel is preached to make sure that thorns are just strangling the Word as it gets preached. A great warfare happens every time the Word of God is read or heralded. And I just appeal to you right now to go to battle in your own heart by prayer and by conscious faith to tear off the thorns of desire for other things and to appropriate the value of God mediated through His preached Word in these next 15 minutes or so.

It is a great issue that's at stake whether your life will be choked so that you walk out of this room dead in 15 minutes or alive and fruit bearing. Warning number three, covetousness gives rise to many other sins. 1 Timothy 6.10 says, the love of money is the root of all evils.

James 4.2 says, you covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and you wage war with one another. You see, covetousness is a breeding ground for thousands of sins. And therefore, do you see what an incredible danger covetousness is in the human heart? A breeding ground for a thousand other sins is this sin called covetousness.

Warning number four, covetousness lets you down when you need help most. Covetousness lets you down when you need help most. And I have in mind the hour of your dying.

Here comes death, the time when you need contentment, you need security, you need help, and it takes wings and flies away. Let me ask you, if you just slumped over right now in your pew dead like Jim did last week, if you just slumped over right now and died and your soul flew away and all that was left was his body lying there on the floor while we scurried around here to call 911, 911, would your soul carry a payload of pleasure in God to heaven? Or would your soul fly into a void and be a cavity where covetousness once dwelt? This is a dangerous thing to allow covetousness to fill the heart and have your satisfaction and your delights and your contentment in God squished out so that when you die and this wicked, deceitful liar called covetousness flies away, all that's left is no help at all in dealing with the day of judgment. It's so serious.

I hope that you find yourself right now in the stillness of this moment being overwhelmingly freed from covetousness. One last warning. In the end, covetousness destroys the soul.

I get this from verse 9 in our text, 1 Timothy 6, those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. What do you think he has in mind when he says destruction? I can imagine some people trying to weasel out of the awfulness of this and say, well, he has in mind a wrecked life, not hell, not ultimate destruction, but just maybe a messed-up marriage, maybe some dishonesty in business, maybe just something that messes up your career. That's not what he has in mind.

And the way we can know from the context that that's not what he has in mind is just following the train of his thought right to verse 12. Because what he's arguing for in verses 6 to 10 is the folly of covetousness. Then he says, Timothy, flee all that.

Then he says, pursue righteousness. Then he says, fight the fight of faith. Then he says, lay hold on life, eternal life.

That's the issue. If you just move back and follow the train of thought, fleeing from covetousness, pursuing righteousness, fighting the fight of faith, and laying hold on eternal life are one thing. The way you lay hold on eternal life in verse 12 is by fighting faith, for faith, by fighting unbelief, by attacking covetousness.

And therefore, when you read in verse 9 that those who cave in to covetousness and desire to be rich are destroyed, that's the opposite of eternal life. And so my last warning to you is the ultimate warning. If you give in to the temptations of covetousness and allow yourselves more and more to fall in love with the world and with things and find more and more of your happiness and your satisfaction in things, you will go to hell.

I don't care if you're in church every Sunday morning. I don't care if you read your Bible every day. The issue is, do you love God? Is your heart content in God? Or are you craving and must you have more money, more things, more prestige, more power, more toys, more leisure, bigger house, better car, more clothes, better celebrations of Christmas? Must you? Because the happiness you have in God is so little, you're in grave danger.

This text teaches very clearly. So much for the warnings. The Bible says, now, and I say it to you, start fleeing covetousness.

Start running from it. When you see it pop up in a TV ad and it is there almost every time they come on, when you see covetousness showing its ugly head on the TV screen, trying to get you to fall in love with the world, run from it. When you see it popping up in a Christmas catalog that starts appearing in the mail right about now, run from it.

When you see it popping up in a neighbor's purchase and you want that, you wish you had that, run from it. That's what it says in verse 11. Flee, flee, flee, Timothy, covetousness.

And then where do you flee to? What do you do? Just keep on running, running, running. Is the Christian always on tail? No. I'll tell you where you run.

You run into the arsenal of the word of God. It has a narrow door and only one door. You run into the arsenal of the word of God and you take down the mantle of prayer.

From Psalm 119 verse 36, and you cloak it around yourself in all of its regal glory. And you say to God, incline my heart to your testimonies and not to getting gain. And then you take down two cutlasses off the wall, short one and a long one designed by the Holy Spirit to destroy covetousness.

And then you wait. And when the lion of covetousness appears at the door with his mouth drooling and starved like an escaped beast from the zoo, hasn't eaten for three days, you show him the short dagger first, right in his face. And you say, there is great gain in godliness with contentment.

Great gain, great gain, this is my faith. Stand your ground, lion. And then you take this long cutlass from Hebrews 13, 5. And you bring it down in front of his face while you hold him at bay.

And you say, keep your life free from the love of money. Be content with what you have. For my God has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Therefore, we can confidently say, the Lord is my helper. I will not fear what can man do to me. And then drive it home.

And when you do that, you know what you're doing? You're fulfilling almost literally Colossians 3, 5, where Paul says, put to death covetousness. Oh, my friends, would you learn with me this fall how to fight sin? How to fight it by faith in the promises of God, in the warnings of God, in the instructions of God. How to avoid all the legalistic strivings of the works of the law, only to find your heart so caught up in contentment in God that obedience is the spillover of the satisfaction of all that Jesus is for us.

Martin Luther was a great warrior with the word of God. He had a great expression of confidence in those last two verses of a mighty fortress. And I want you to use those two verses now to express your own confidence.

And oh, I hope you can. And I hope if you can't, then maybe as we sing together, you will find the Holy Spirit just filling you up with confidence in one little word that can fell the devil. The last two verses, number 118, let's just celebrate the adequacy and the power of the word of God for all of our warfare as we stand.

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