

## Covetousness and the Rich Men of Luke (231125 SCSF)

What does covetousness mean to you? We are told in the 10 commandments that “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that *is* your neighbor’s. (Ex20:17)” I think in general we know from this, and our understanding of the word, that we should not desire our neighbor’s goods. But is there more to it?

Yeshua raised the commandments to a higher, spiritual plain. In the Sermon on the Mount, Yeshua gave us several examples in which He magnified and expanded the commandments to a more spiritual level. Being angry at someone without a cause can be murder. Lusting for a woman can be adultery. But Yeshua didn’t give added spiritual meaning to the commandments only in the Sermon on the Mount. And there is one remarkable section in the book of Luke where Yeshua discusses **covetousness** in a way perhaps you have not focused on. And He does so using several parables and real life examples.

So today, I’m going to show you how Yeshua expanded the tenth commandment with the help of the 5 rich men of the book of Luke.

Luke 12: <sup>13</sup> Then one from the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” <sup>14</sup> But He said to him, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?”

Yeshua then addresses the crowd:

<sup>15</sup> And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of **covetousness**, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”

As we will see, this was a loaded statement; one that He proceeds to elaborate on to cast a deeper and more spiritual light on the subject of covetousness, and a meaning that we do not always associate with the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment. And to illustrate His point, He first relates a parable and introduces us to our first rich man:

<sup>16</sup> Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: “The ground of a certain **rich man** yielded plentifully. <sup>17</sup> And he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?’ [You might think about this yourself. What would you do if your ground yielded abundantly?] <sup>18</sup> So he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. <sup>19</sup> And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, *and* be merry.”’ <sup>20</sup> But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’ <sup>21</sup> “So *is* he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

The commandment on coveting, as related in Exodus and Deuteronomy, says: (this time from Deu 5:21 NKJV) “You shall not covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his **field**, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

In short, we are not to covet our neighbor's **stuff**. But this rich man was consumed with laying up what his own ground had produced. Think about it. This "stuff" didn't belong to his neighbor, and yet Yeshua gave this parable to illustrate His statement in verse 15: "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." As is often the case, Yeshua is elaborating on the commandment. Just as hatred in your heart can be murder, and lust for a woman can be adultery, so laying up treasure for yourself can be covetousness. And when we realize what He is saying, we can see why this is so. But before we discuss this, note that Yeshua didn't stop with the parable:

<sup>22</sup> Then He said to His disciples, "**Therefore** I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. <sup>23</sup> Life is more than food, and the body *is more* than clothing. <sup>24</sup> Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? <sup>25</sup> And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? <sup>26</sup> If you then are not able to do *the* least, why are you anxious for the rest? <sup>27</sup> Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. <sup>28</sup> If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more *will He clothe* you, O you of **little faith**?"

<sup>29</sup> "And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. <sup>30</sup> For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. <sup>31</sup> But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.

<sup>32</sup> "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup> **Sell what you have and give alms**; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I'm going to suggest that **all** of this instruction was inspired by the request of the man in the crowd, and Yeshua was using this as a teaching opportunity regarding covetousness. And with that in mind, several observations can be made from the parable and the teaching that followed:

1. Hoarding goods as this rich man did places us in danger of not being rich toward God, as He said in verse 21. Paul in Col 3:5, and other places, equates covetousness with idolatry. And this applies as much toward honestly gained wealth as it does to desiring what our neighbor has. We can make these goods—our own goods, not our neighbors--into an idol, as this rich man did, and be guilty of covetousness. Laying up treasure for ourselves can distract us from our relationship to God.
2. Laying up treasure, as this rich man, can make us complacent. We no longer need God. We have what we need, or at least we think we do. The rich man wanted to take his ease, eat, drink, and be merry. Again, laying up treasure can make us complacent so we no longer rely on God.
3. The very act of striving to lay up for ourselves can generate stress and worry over whether we have enough (v22-23). It can destroy our faith (v28), and distract us from what is really important. Being anxious over what we think we lack, or more likely about what we think we might lose, actually leads to covetousness, trying to hang on to everything we have.

4. How we handle money and wealth is a test God has placed before us, or some of us anyway. And compared to the rest of the world which is not as wealthy as we tend to be, I can say it is a test He has given most of us. And the more we have, the greater the test. The rich man of the parable didn't fare too well in this regard. This is not the last time He brings up how we handle money as being a test of our character.
5. God is our real benefactor. If we have gained wealth as this man did, it is because God caused the ground to yield plentifully. Or perhaps He causes circumstances to work in our favor, if nothing more obvious than having health enough to gain some wealth. This rich man did not give God thanks, or even acknowledge Him. Do we?
6. But my last point may be the hardest, and the most controversial: It isn't enough to be thankful to God for what He gives us. God wants, in fact as we will see with the remaining rich men, God requires that we be generous and share what God has given us. The rich man thought these were his goods. But God is telling us that in a real sense they did not all belong to him. At least some belonged to his neighbor, because God intended that they be shared with his neighbor. And failing to give what ought to belong to his neighbor effectively made him guilty of coveting his neighbor's stuff. It is this last point that Yeshua comes back to repeatedly and the one we are going to dwell on the most.

So to summarize the lesson from our first rich man: The conclusion of the parable talks about "he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." Then Yeshua goes further and tells us in verse 34 "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We are not even supposed to worry about hoarding food and clothing (let alone luxuries). God will take care of us. He tells us explicitly in verse 33 to sell what we have and give to the poor. To not worry so much about whether we have enough, but to have faith in God. I'm not saying to ignore the basic needs of our life, but God has promised to provide them, so we are not to worry about them to the point where we place God second, nor ignore the needs of our neighbor.

In the chapters that follow, this subject comes up frequently. In chapter 14 for example is a dinner at a Pharisee's house:

Luke 14:12 Then He also said to him who invited Him, "When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. <sup>13</sup> But when you give a feast, invite *the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.* <sup>14</sup> And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Strong and powerful words that illustrate this same concept. Yeshua was instructing the Pharisee, and all in attendance, and us, to be generous to those who are poor and in need. And not to even expect a reward in this life for doing so.

But I want to move ahead now to our second rich man, found in Luke 16. The chapter starts with a very odd parable about a **rich man** who has heard that his steward has not been dealing faithfully with his master's goods. Being informed that he is going to be removed from his job, the steward then proceeds to cut deals with the master's debtors. The master hears about this, and, while we might expect that he would be furious, all we are told of his reaction is that he commends the steward for dealing shrewdly so that he would not find himself out on the street. And then Yeshua adds these comments:

<sup>9</sup>“And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. <sup>10</sup>He who *is* faithful in *what is* least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in *what is* least is unjust also in much. <sup>11</sup>Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true *riches*? <sup>12</sup>And if you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own? <sup>13</sup>“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

As I said in one of my points earlier, money can be a test. How do we handle it? If we hoard it as our first rich man did, we are definitely not able to serve God as we should. There are promises in the Bible that God will prosper us when we obey him. Of course, sometimes that might not be fulfilled until the kingdom. But if and when God blesses us in this life, remember God is watching us to see what we will do with it. Will we be known as generous and sharing? Will we deal faithfully with what God has entrusted to us? Or will the wealth take over our lives. We cannot serve both God and money. But the story continues:

<sup>14</sup>Now the Pharisees, **who were lovers of money**, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. <sup>15</sup>And He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Yeshua does not speak highly of those who are lovers of money, instead of God. And then Yeshua proceeds to give them a parable, involving our third rich man:

<sup>19</sup>“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, <sup>21</sup>desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. <sup>22</sup>So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried.

There follows a discussion with Abraham about the torment the rich man experiences as a result of his failure to be generous and kind toward Lazarus. Once again, this rich man was guilty of covetousness, and would not share what God had given him with his neighbor, a man who lay at his gate just wanting the crumbs from his table that were undoubtedly going to be thrown away anyway.

It is interesting that Abraham played such a prominent role in the parable. Abraham was an extremely wealthy man. I don’t know if you have noticed, but Genesis makes a point of telling us how wealthy he was.

Genesis 13:2 Abram *was* very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold... 6 Now the land was not able to support them, that they might dwell together, for their possessions were so **great** that they could not dwell together.

Genesis 24: <sup>35</sup>The LORD has blessed my master greatly, and he has become great; and He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys.

Yet Abraham allowed Lot to choose the best of the land. He refused to take spoils from the defeat of the kings. He paid full price for a burial cave. And Abraham was eager to do or give up anything God

asked of him, including leaving his family in Haran, sending his son Ishmael away when asked to do so, or even sacrificing his son Isaac. In light of all he was willing to give up, is there any doubt what Abraham would have done with his wealth if God had required it of him?

This brings us now to our fourth rich man. This one, however, is not a parable.

Luke 18:18 Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”<sup>19</sup> So Yeshua said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one *is* good but One, *that is*, God.

What did Yeshua mean by this? Was Yeshua saying He wasn’t good? I would like to suggest that He was establishing with this ruler just who He was. That if the ruler considered Him to be a Good Teacher, then he should be looking at Him as being a Teacher from God Himself. If this ruler really sought an answer from God, then that is what he should be expecting, in spite of the fact that Yeshua’s instruction to him was not going to be easy.

<sup>20</sup> You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not bear false witness,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother.’ ”<sup>21</sup> And he said, “All these things I have kept from my youth.”

Indeed, this ruler seems to have been diligent to keep the commandments. And Yeshua seems to have known this, as He cited five of the last six commandments about loving your neighbor as yourself. But Yeshua left out one of the commandments—the commandment on coveting. And I suggest in light of what we have read already that He did so deliberately. Because Yeshua then hits him with an answer to the ruler’s question that he was not prepared to receive:

<sup>22</sup> So when Yeshua heard these things, He said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” [This instruction was almost identical to what was given to the disciples in Luke 12 about not worrying]  
<sup>23</sup> But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich.

I don’t know how generous this rich man was. Did he tend to hoard his wealth as much as those in the parables Yeshua had related? Or was this just an extreme test that Yeshua decided to put this man through, for our benefit, or the disciples, or the man himself. In any case, Yeshua knew this man had a major flaw in his character, and wasn’t keeping all of the commandments to love his neighbor as himself. And this had the serious potential of keeping him from inheriting eternal life, which is what this ruler had asked about.

<sup>24</sup> And when Yeshua saw that he became very sorrowful, He said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” <sup>26</sup> And those who heard it said, “Who then can be saved?” <sup>27</sup> But He said, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.”

Why is it so hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom? Is it not for the very reasons we have already noted? Because it tends to keep them from following and seeking God wholeheartedly? Because wealth becomes an idol? And because it can be hard for a rich man to be as generous as he ought to be? It can be hard to be rich and not be guilty of breaking the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment against covetousness.

<sup>28</sup> Then Peter said, “See, we have left all and followed You.” <sup>29</sup> So He said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, <sup>30</sup> who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Once again, God will provide for our needs, even if we have to leave all behind. But, there is one more rich man in the book of Luke:

Luke 19:1 Then *Yeshua* entered and passed through Jericho. <sup>2</sup> Now behold, *there was* a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief **tax collector**, and he was **rich**. <sup>3</sup> And he sought to see who Yeshua was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that *way*. <sup>5</sup> And when Yeshua came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.”

Think about this for a moment. Yeshua did not travel alone. There were the 12, the women, and who knows how many others. This could have been quite a group that Zacchaeus was being asked to look after. But I think Yeshua knew he could afford it. In any case, whether just Yeshua, or the others as well:

<sup>6</sup> So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. <sup>7</sup> But when they [those in the crowd] saw *it*, they all complained, saying, “He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.”

Tax collectors were not well liked. They were all looked upon as sinners. And it was assumed their wealth was obtained through their sinful behavior. And Zacchaeus was a **chief** tax collector.

<sup>8</sup> Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.”

<sup>9</sup> And Yeshua said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; <sup>10</sup> for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

There was something about Zacchaeus’ statement or attitude that brought a remarkable commendation from Yeshua. Could it be the fact that this rich man was demonstrating an example of generosity that was not at all characteristic of the rich men we have been reading about? And was there anything about calling him a son of Abraham that might also reflect on him being a rich man that was more generous than normal? After telling us that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, it is encouraging to read about one rich man who seems to have developed a more godly approach to his wealth.

So why am I giving this message? Am I trying to make you feel guilty if you don’t give money to all the homeless you encounter on the street corners? Am I trying to convince you to sell all you have and give it to the poor? God did not require that of Abraham, and fortunately does not do so with everybody. No, I’m not trying to do any of those things. I’m not even trying to tell you to be more generous. I am only pointing out to you, and me, that Yeshua not only expanded on the commandments about murder and adultery, but He also expanded the commandment regarding coveting. And failing to be generous **when it is in our power to do so** is covetousness. What we do

with what God has given us is between us and God, but we should not ignore this instruction. And if we do examine ourselves and decide to make any changes in our lives, let's do it with wisdom and understanding of our obligation to also provide for our **own**. Should you give money to the beggar on the street? I'm not saying whether you should or should not. But think about these things while you're deciding.

God wants us to learn how to properly use money, or other forms of wealth, that He allows us to have. We cannot serve both God and money. If we find ourselves focusing too much on obtaining wealth, we can lose sight of our calling. If we find ourselves focusing too much on keeping wealth, we can lose faith in God to provide for us. And, in that light, God wants us to be generous, to share, to provide for the poor. And that message was not unique to the Gospels. Dozens of verses deal with the subject of the poor, and our obligation to them:

Proverbs 19:17 He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, And He will pay back what he has given.

Proverbs 21:13 Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor Will also cry himself and not be heard.

Proverbs 22:9 He who has a generous eye will be blessed, For he gives of his bread to the poor.

Psalms 41:1 Blessed is he who considers the poor; The Lord will deliver him in time of trouble.

Deuteronomy 15:7<sup>7</sup> "If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, <sup>8</sup> but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. <sup>9</sup> Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,' and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the LORD against you, and it become sin among you. <sup>10</sup> You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. <sup>11</sup> For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.'

Our approach to the 10 commandments, especially the 6 regarding love toward man, requires a higher, spiritual level of understanding and observance. We know that we are not to hate even our enemies, but are required to do good to them when it is in our power to do so. We are not even to have inappropriate thoughts about someone who is not our spouse. But perhaps the hardest for many of us is the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment. It is one thing to see our neighbor have things it would be nice to have and not wish those things were ours. It is something else to have money and things God has given us to see what we will do with them, and have the ability to part with them so we can share with others and exhibit generosity to those in need when God puts the opportunity before us. May we all learn these lessons about covetousness conveyed through these 5 rich men in the book of Luke.