
Coveting

When in school I worked part time in the kitchen as a student, mostly cleaning and washing dishes. On Saturdays, a crew of students was called in to do a deep cleaning that involved taking apart the air make-up unit above the stove and cleaning every part. It was a lot of work, and one week one of my fellow students suggested to the supervisor that we clean it every other week. The supervisor, who was very experienced, gave permission and that week we did not clean the unit. The next week when we began cleaning, we found that it was four times as dirty as it would have been had we cleaned it the previous week. The supervisor knew the consequences of neglecting the normal cleaning regimen, and he knew that if left just one week, the job would be so much more difficult.

A large city in the United States was having a problem with a dramatic increase in major crimes – murder, assault, and the like, and the chief of police was looking for a solution. A decade or so before, the police, because they were short staffed, decided to overlook some of the more petty crimes – shoplifting and vandalism and the like – and did not arrest or prosecute the offenders. Someone suggested that if the police began to crack down on minor crimes as well as dealing with major crimes that this would lead to a decrease in major crimes. Because nothing else seemed to work, this is what the police force did, and in a few years the number of major crimes began to fall. The conclusion was that when people who commit minor crimes, if left unpunished, will escalate into committing major crimes.

We could say the same about sin. We recall the story of David and Bathsheba. David happened to see a woman bathing on the roof of a neighbouring house and instead of turning away, he sent for the woman and one thing led to another, and she became pregnant. Because she was married, this posed an additional problem, namely that her husband could charge him with adultery, so he had her husband killed. A minor sin, left unchecked, turned into a major sin and, technically, according to the law, David could have been put to death for causing the death of another. If David had repented of his first sin, voyeurism, he would not have become a murderer.

The last of the 10 Commandments is the command that we not covet anything that belongs to our neighbour. Coveting is a sin that unseen and does not seem to be that significant, for, after all, what harm is there in desiring something that belongs to another. Yet, we would have to admit that if we didn't desire something that was not ours, chances are we would not break any of the other commandments either. For example, if I didn't covet the chocolate bar in the convenience store, it's unlikely that I would steal it. Similarly, if no one ever looked with desire at someone to whom they were not married, it is unlikely that anyone would commit adultery. Some have said that coveting is the first step toward breaking the other commandments, and if we avoid coveting, we will be much more obedient to God's will in all aspects of life.

The Heidelberg Catechism, in its discussion on the 10 Commandments, doesn't say much about coveting as a sin in and of itself. Instead, when it answers the question, "What is God's will for you in the tenth commandment," it says, "That not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any one of God's

commandments should ever arise in my heart.” Clearly the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism believed that the sin of coveting was tied to all the other commandments and was the beginning point for breaking those commandments.

Thus, while coveting seems to be the most insignificant of all the commandments, it is more like the minor crime which, if left unchecked, will develop into major crime. It is like the dirt on a ventilation unit that if left uncleaned will result in the more rapid accumulation of more dirt.

So, how do we avoid coveting? It’s not easy, but perhaps the first step is to be grateful for what we have. People who covet are counting the things they don’t have while people who are grateful count the things they do have. If we are grateful for our relationships, our possessions, our friends, our place in life, everything that God has given to us, we will have far less time to covet that which we don’t have.

Thanksgiving Day is in a few days, and we will be reminded to give God thanks for all his blessings. It would be good if we could count our blessings over the next few days and give God thanks for all of them. We might well find that as we name our blessings, we don’t really have room for that which we don’t have. Perhaps being grateful is the best antidote to coveting, and if we avoid coveting, we might be just a little better at avoiding those other sins as well.

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