

God's Answer To Our Covetousness

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- [0 : 00] Our Father, in the quiet of this Christmas Eve, we believe that it's possible that you could speak to us.
- You could speak to the particular needs and necessities of our own hearts and lives. We know it would mean that you would have to know who we are, and we would have to be able to hear what it is you're saying.
- O, by your Holy Spirit, grant grace to each one of us. We may know that you know who we are, but we may have the grace to hear what you say.
- In Christ's name, amen. I hope you'll do anything you can to make yourself as comfortable as possible, including the steps up here if they look attractive to you.
- It's a delight to see all of you, and I don't really care whatever it was that brought you here tonight. I'm very grateful for whatever that was.
- [1 : 20] And I want to tell you that God isn't getting along with us very well now. He's not generally respected as having very much relevance.
- And indeed, a good many people, if you scratch them very deeply, you will find them profoundly angry at God. It used to be that people lived in fear of God being angry at them, but that fear no longer seems to cut ice, and in our world, we are angry with God, angry for the way he deals with us.
- I think that anger is based on a kind of ignorance of who he is and what he's up to. And I want to describe to you two laws that I think most people know the first one, and on the grounds of it are appropriately angry with God.
- On the grounds of the second one, I think it would be appropriate if you were to reconsider. Now, the first one is, Thou shalt not covet.
- And Paul picks that up in Romans chapter 7 and tries to deal with it. You may remember from having recited it on numerous occasions that you're not to covet your neighbor's house, nor his wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is his.
- [3 : 04] To covet means to boil. The word covet is related to the word Cupid, and there's the lovely word that you occasionally run across in the authorized version called concupiscence.
- That is, you really long for something. You really hanker for something. You eagerly desire something. You wish to possess it.
- There are... It's a kind of boiling, seething, lusting desire to possess. Yes! And the word says, Thou shalt not covet.
- And I don't think it would be inappropriate to say that in the world in which we live, coveting has become one of the main engines of our civilization.
- The people, by their coveting, and by the cultivation and exciting of their desires, make the whole wheels of our economy go round.
- [4 : 20] Covetousness becomes the way that we are to relate to our neighbor. And so it becomes singularly inappropriate that God should say, Thou shalt not covet.

To lust, to desire, to long for, to hanker after. He says, don't do it. And the reason, if you look at it more closely, is that you are lusting or coveting or desiring something that doesn't belong to you.

And that desire is so strong in us that we simply can't deny it. If we have this longing, then it motivates us, it drives us, we keep going.

It finds expression in greed and in all sorts of ways. That's how we covet. We desire something which is unattainable, unattainable, something which is another person's property, something which is unlawful for us to have, something which does our neighbor harm.

And God says, you're not to do it. Now, what happens, Paul says in Romans 7, is that he was brought up happily and fully covetous.

[5 : 48] That was so much a part of who he was that he couldn't separate it from his being. That we get to the point where we can't even think of ourselves apart from this activity of coveting.

And seeing that that coveting is fulfilled in some way. And Paul says that's what it is. That's what the, that's what human happiness is.

To have this desire and to find it fulfilled. And that's the kind of fantasy that we live in. And Paul says what God does is come and take that, which is the most, the most valuable thing we own, and to smash it and to say, thou shalt not covet.

And then you suddenly realize that the whole of your life is made up of doing what God doesn't want you to do. And there you're caught.

And what can you do? You can either take it and bend it to shape you and your life, in which case you break the law, or if you leave it straight, then you've got to learn to pretend to do what you know you can't do.

[7 : 07] And so Paul goes on to tell us in Romans chapter 7, that this condition he finds to be utterly intolerable. And he says you might well ask the question, why has God given a law which is impossible for us to keep?

Why has he given a law which contradicts who I am? Why has he given a law which undermines the whole of the structure of our life?

And my life in particular? I thought what God was trying to do was something good, but I have this covetousness, and God says I'm not to exercise.

And I can't do what God says. And so I am angry with God. And I think this is such an important part of the whole of the New Testament, Romans 7.

I think it's important because here you come to the end of our human resources, to the end of our human capacity to be religious.

[8 : 20] that if you're honest, you will find what God commands and what you can perform are in contradiction one with another. And so to avoid hypocrisy, to avoid Phariseism, to avoid your religion becoming just a pretense, goodbye God, because you and I can't live in the same kind of world.

And that's one way of looking. And I think it's not an inappropriate way of coming to terms with our own guts, as it were.

That terrible sense that what God wants and what I'm able to do are contradictory. Paul, in his agony, cries out, Oh, wretched man that I am!

Who's going to deliver me? From this contradiction. I know that God is right, and it would be a far better place if I didn't covet, but then I can't stop coveting.

That's the way I work. The longing, the lust, the desire drives me. It makes me the person I am. And God says, don't do it.

- [9 : 43] And Paul cries out, I'm trapped. I don't know where to turn. I don't know which way to go. And I think it's at that point that most of us, when the capacity to covet has come to full tide in our lives, abandon the faith, perhaps in which we were brought up as children, because we recognize that it doesn't work.
- And it's essentially pretending, and it's not going to work. And that's the agony that Paul describes in Romans chapter 7.
- He recognizes that he is helpless before the demand of God. I just gave you one example. I mean, you could do with any of the Ten Commandments.
- You could steal or commit adultery or lie. It's funny, though, that all those are things that you do. Coveting is something which is the secret of your own heart.
- [10 : 57] If you're caught doing any of the others, you can justify yourself. But it's a kind of shameful thing that right at your heart, you find that your motivation is all wrong with respect to the demands of God.
- We become angry with God. And there is another law. And this law is the law which brings us to Christmas and to Christmas Eve.
- And it says in chapter 8 and verse 3, God has done what the law couldn't do. God has made it possible to do what we by ourselves cannot do.
- And how has he done it? He's done it by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin.
- He puts his son, Jesus Christ, in the place that we are in. Subject to the same temptations, the same desire to covet, the same lusts, the same desires, the same appetites, the same longings, the same full tide of passion sweeping through his flesh as sweeps through ours.
- [12 : 22] And you may think that there is a fuller tide sweeping through yours, but that's just because you don't know anybody else well enough. It's not a peculiar thing.
- It's part of our human heritage. And it says of Jesus Christ, the babe of Bethlehem, that God sent him in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, that he sent him into the world.
- And so Jesus came and lived in this world. And by the way he lived, he condemns us.
- We are condemned because he has done what we can't do. And of course, the only way to treat somebody who does that is to get rid of him.
- So we got rid of him. That's what the crucifixion was about. But God raised him from the dead.
- [13 : 31] And so it says that there is another law. Not this law thou shalt not covet, but Paul describes it as the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus.
- There is life in Christ because he has been able to fulfill the demands of the law.
- God has done in Christ what we could not do in sending his own son. So when we come to celebrate this Christmas time, we are celebrating this fact, the strange and wonderful fact that God in Christ has done, that Christ in our flesh has done what we could not do.
- And so life is now not a matter of living with the frustration of not being able to do what we know we ought to do. And what we know God demands we do.
- It's no longer living with that constant frustration, but now it is living under the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus through putting our faith in Christ Jesus.
- [14 : 53] Now instead of coveting your neighbor's house, his wife, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his ass, anything that's his, and how we, how hopeless we are because we go on with it.

It doesn't matter what level of income you're at. Covetousness and lust of this kind afflicts you. I learned that there's one of Aesop's fables about a man who was told he could have whatever he wanted.

the only condition was that when he got it, his neighbor would get twice as much. So he chose to have one eye taken out.

Now Mr. Aesop understood the problem we have with our neighbor. You see that something radical has to change in man between coveting what belongs to your neighbor and loving your neighbor and desiring that he should have even what you don't have and even to have it at your expense if need be.

And that's according to a law which was established by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That by the Holy Spirit which he gives to us we are enabled to be what we could never be by ourselves.

[16 : 38] That's all it says really. That there is there is that law. And Paul puts it in very deliberate terms.

He says you either are a slave of the law of sin and death consumed by covetousness that you cannot control and the end of which is very clearly set before you or else you are a free man free from that law because of Jesus Christ and his coming into the world.

Because God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do sending his son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh.

I've got myself in a trap. Here it is Christmas Eve and you all want to have a good time and I'm giving you what for.

Well it's just that Christmas could be so immeasurably richer for all of us if we could get hold anew and afresh of that reality that what God has done by sending his son Jesus Christ into our world is to make us his sons by putting his spirit in our hearts so that the longing of our hearts is to do what our father desires us to do and the presence in our hearts of his Holy Spirit is ultimately going to enable us to do it and the focus of that is because of Jesus Christ that's what makes it possible now whether you like it or not you've been summoned to a feast and the feast is now to be spread before you and in this feast you will be offered a very small piece of bread and a very short sip of wine but such a banquet such royal food as is put before you and by that outward and visible sign of partaking of that bread and wine you are saying

[19 : 26] I am not under the law of sin and death I am under the law of spirit and life in Christ Jesus by reason of faith in him and his enabling I am enabled to do and to be what by myself I cannot be and I cannot do and in the communion and fellowship of those who put their faith in Jesus Christ the one whom God sent into the world to accomplish what we couldn't do by ourselves by faith in this Jesus Christ then there is that source of joy and peace and happiness and purpose and love and the transformation by which from coveting that which belongs to your neighbor you will be enabled to give to your neighbor in love even all that you have and that's the simple revolution that God starts with the birth of

Jesus in Bethlehem and that's why we're here and I bid you all to come to this banquet and partake those who don't I want to know that you are deeply respected for not doing so you're not it's not a matter of you have to because you're here it's your choice you are invited to you're invited to in the name of Jesus Christ and it's his table and he issues the invitation and if by reason of doubt or uncertainty or rebellion or anger it's not right for you to do it by reason of your loyalty to another congregation of Christians it's not right for you to do it if by reason of the fact that this isn't the time for you to do it then you don't have to come to communion but I do want you to know that you are warmly and lovingly invited to share in this banquet to share in this which God has done for us in Christ and that you might be reconciled to God through Christ

Amen