**SIX FEET WAS ALL HE NEEDED**

**Thou Shalt Not Covet**

Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian writer who penned such classics as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, wrote a short story called “*How Much Land Does A Man Need*?” It is a brilliant description of the vice we call greed, and that Jesus called covetousness.

The story is about a Russian peasant named Pahom who had very little in life. He owned only a small parcel of land and a milk cow. He always dreamed of having more but was never sure how he would ever get it. One day Satan heard Pahom mutter what he would do if he owned much land. This gave the devil an idea. He sat about to steadily increase the peasants land-holdings, never allowing him to be content with gaining just a little bit more. At first he gained 20 acres. Soon discontented he learned how he could gain 100 acres. Then later 1300 acres. Finally the story progressed where he would be given all the land he could walk on from sunup to sundown, with the restriction that he must be back at the exact spot where he started at sunrise. He couldn’t believe his luck. He could walk many miles in one day.

You know how this turns out. His greed led him to continue walking further than he intended. When he realized he would lose everything if he didn’t get back by sundown he began to run. He ran so fast that he succeeded only at the last second of reaching the beginning spot, only to fall dead. The story ends with these lines: *“His servant picked up the spade and dug a grave long enough for Pahom to lie in. He buried him in it. Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.”*

That story is the ending to all covetous people. Solomon said it this way, lamenting the lot of men, “*All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust*” (Eccl. 3:20). He had said earlier in that great book of wisdom: *“All things are full of labor; Man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor the ear filled with hearing”* (Eccl. 1:8).

Pahom, the fictional character in Tolstoy’s parable, is really us during weak moments in our life. Satan makes it easy for us to start seeing that shiny new car, that cool new gadget, that finer kitchen ware, that new furniture, etc., etc., etc. In and of themselves they are not bad, or wrong to have, but the Tempter knows how to push our buttons to turn “new” or “more” or “better” into the word God calls “*covet*o*usness*.” There is a fine line there and we need to be aware of when we are on the verge of crossing it.

To help us navigate that fine line between “want” and “need” the apostle Paul reminds us repeatedly with warnings like these:

*“But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints”* (Eph. 5:3).

*“Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry”* (Col. 3:5).

*“Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Heb. 13:5).

Don’t think for a second that you can easily discern when you are standing on that fine line and are about to step over it into the world of covetousness (aka – idolatry). The devil is a shrewd and cunning creature who knows how to use billboards, television, the internet, and bright shiny showrooms and department stores to attract our attention and get us dreaming of “bigger and better” and “new and improved.” While we smirk at the silly notion of “keeping up with the Jones’s” – we seldom realize that the Jones’s are disguised as Gucci, Chevy, GE, Apple, Netflix, and a thousand other brand names we see every day of our lives.

The Tenth of the Ten Commandments was probably Satan’s greatest temptation to Israel when God said, *“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.”* Being #10 made it look like the bottom of the totem pole, thus not as critical as #1. My study of Israel’s history throughout the Old Testament helps me to realize they broke #10 as much as they broke #1.

So do we.

If you don’t believe me, believe Jesus. *“Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses”* (Lk. 12:15). We might as well fall down to Baal, Asherah, Dagon or the Golden Calf as to spend our life desiring “stuff” and “things.”

Achan, a simple soldier in the Israelite army, so easily disregarded Joshua’s warning to “*by all means abstain from the accursed things, lest you become accursed… but all the silver and gold and vessels of bronze and iron are consecrated to the Lord, they shall come into the treasury of the Lord*” (Josh. 6:18). He confessed to Joshua in these words: “*When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them*” (Josh. 7:21).

Achan was Pahom in Tolstoy’s story. Achan is too often us in our story. Recently I was helping a poor family move into an apartment. They had so little. But when I returned a few months later they had a brand new LG 65 inch TV screen covering their entire wall, with a supreme cable package with hundreds of stations that had to cost a small fortune. Achan, being dead, yet speaks. He is alive and well in America. Beware!

Six feet was all Pahom needed. In the end, it is all we will need too. We came into this world with nothing, and all we take out of it is our character. Make it godly, not greedy.

Today, let us be content. - Rick