

[R2339 : page 219]

THE SIN OF COVETOUSNESS.

– JULY 31. – 1 Kings 21:4-16. –

"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house." – Ex. 20:17.

JEZEBEL is marked by the incidents of this lesson, if we had no other record of her evil way, as being a most diabolical woman. The tenderness which belongs to her sex had entirely given place to the feeling of envy, pride and ambition, incident to her great exaltation to power as the wife of King Ahab. She was ready to instigate perjury, and the foulest of murder, to gratify her whims, or to please those who truckled to her vanity. And the terrible degradation to which the people of Israel and their elders, who were presumably of average or more than average intelligence, had descended, is shown by their willingness to obey their wicked queen, in utter disregard of their own consciences and of justice. It is doubtful whether our disgust should be greater with the queen, who instigated the evil, or with the elders, who so supinely became her tools to accomplish it. This shows, however, that where a people lose sight of the grand teachings of the law of the Lord, and come under the influence of the devil, through other religions, there is no knowing where the corruption of morals will end – all sense of justice and right seems to become obliterated in proportion as people are separated from the Lord and from the word of his testimony.

The fact that infidels of to-day are not always immoral is no contradiction of this thought, for altho they may reject the Lord in their hearts, they cannot reject [R2340 : page 219] nor get away from the influences of his law of justice which has come to be recognized throughout the entire civilized world, and made the basis of all civil law. Besides, they are continually in touch with Christian influences, and some of them (for instance, Robert Ingersoll) received from Christian parents a good moral basis of character, which would not exhaust in one generation, even tho the faith were lost from it.

The beginning of this crime perpetrated by Jezebel and the elders of Israel – the murder of Naboth – was Ahab's sin of covetousness. He coveted Naboth's vineyard, and wished to purchase it, and, as the sequel shows, altho he did not perpetrate the crime of murder himself, he was quite satisfied with the crime and its results, and hastened to appropriate the murdered man's vineyard at the earliest opportunity. There is a great lesson here for Christian people to-day. While the crime of murder is recognized and [R2340 : page 220] thoroughly reprobated, the crime of covetousness is now not only general and common, but almost approved as proper. It seems to be generally practised, and almost without a suspicion as to its being wrong, sinful, condemned of the Lord, and fruitful of many evil works of the flesh and of the devil.

We do not mean to charge as covetousness a desire to prosper as well as one's neighbor: desires are covetous when we wish to possess and enjoy that which we see in the possession of our neighbor: it implies a willingness to take from him a part or all of his prosperity, and to appropriate the same to ourselves. This spirit of covetousness may be readily discerned among business men and manufacturers; less readily discerned, but nevertheless present, in the ranks of labor, and in the social circle. It is unnecessary to point out how business people envy one another success, and seek to attract from one another the trade which brings the success. And in the ranks of labor, especially where competition is open, it is not infrequently the case that the workman will disparage the work or character of a fellow-workman, in order to have favor with the overseer or employer, or in hope of personal advancement. These are illustrations of covetousness in operation.

In society it works very stealthily, very quietly, fearing that it should react upon the covetous one unfavorably; hence, in society, the effort to undermine the character of another and thereby to advance one's self in the good graces of others, is kept under cover, and ably assisted by its yoke-fellow, hypocrisy. When covetousness sees another occupying a preferred place, it stealthily conceals the dagger

with which it would smite the Naboth that thwarts its ambitions. It sometimes assumes a mask of love, and strikes the dagger of scandal under professions of love and esteem, or of pity and sympathy. At other times it has the hypocritical mask of duty, religion, fidelity to God, etc., while it seeks to stab Naboth in his vitals, and to gain possession of the vineyard coveted, – or whatever it may be.

Nor is the Church of God free from those who have this spirit of covetousness. It inspires many petty jealousies and envyings and strifes as to which should be greater, for honorable positions, etc. And how many large and small scandals have been the results of covetousness, and a desire to break down the influence of one, for the purpose of establishing the influence of another, or of himself or herself?

Ahab's covetousness was of the most approved kind, in that it sought to act through others, and stoned Naboth to death by proxy, rather than directly by his own act. That Ahab fully endorsed the conduct of Jezebel is shown by his ready acceptance of the fruits of her villainy; and this fact, in connection with the fact that the Lord sent the reproof as much to Ahab as to Jezebel, leaves room for the inference that he had intentionally worked upon the feelings of Jezebel, with a view to getting her (more courageous for wickedness than himself) to devise and carry out plans for the satisfaction of his covetousness. So some to-day seem to feel free to covet the possessions of others – social, religious, financial or otherwise – and to take possession of these, if possible, but they strive to have the dirtiest part of the work done by others, or at least not directly by themselves. But such unquestionably are sharers in every crime to which their covetousness by any road may lead others.

Let all who have named the name of Christ be especially on guard respecting this deceptive covert sin; and the best ounce of protection that we can take against it (far better than any pound of cure after it has entered in) is to have our hearts permeated with the spirit of love, of which we are told, "Love worketh no ill to his neighbor." And more

than this, "Love envieth not, seeketh not her own [interests merely, but is concerned for the interests of others] is kind, helpful, generous, good."

As an illustration of how hypocrisy usually accompanies covetousness, seeking to cover up the real motives and intentions not only from fellow-creatures, but from one's own conscience, and from the Lord, note in this lesson how Jezebel accomplished her purpose through the appointment of a feast, and the giving of Naboth, the victim, a seat of honor in connection therewith. Alas, that it must be said that religion has often been injured by being made the tool of hypocrisy and covetousness. And similar principles are still at work in the world, and the same great prime mover and instigator of evil is still master of ceremonies, and as willing as ever to help forward every wicked cause and to prosper the evil work and way of the covetous. "We are not ignorant of his devices."

"My soul, be on thy guard,
Ten thousand foes arise;
The hosts of sin are pressing hard
To draw thee from the prize."

But while the Lord did not interfere to protect Naboth, nor to prevent the machinations of the Evil One and his servants, he nevertheless took note of the evil, and did not permit it to pass unpunished. Accordingly, when Ahab went in to take possession of the vineyard, and to rejoice his heart that his covetous desires had reached accomplishment, the Lord sent Elijah to meet him in the vineyard. Ahab recognized the prophet at once, and evidently smitten by his conscience, exclaimed: "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" And Elijah answered, "I have found thee, because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight [R2340 : page 221] of the Lord." Then follows the prophecy of violent deaths to his children, and that the dogs should eat Jezebel; all literally fulfilled later.

However, Ahab was learning to have great confidence in the word of Elijah, and in the power of Jehovah; and when he heard this prophecy, "he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth and went softly." On account of this degree of repentance the Lord sent word through Elijah that the calamities prophesied would not be in Ahab's day, but in the days of his sons. The fact that sinners may for a time go unpunished, the Apostle Peter shows us, is a mark of God's patience and forbearance, and not an indication that he will not reward both the welldoer and the evildoer.

Some one has said, "Covetousness is like drinking the salt waters of the sea, which only increase the thirst; or like piling wood on the fire, which only makes it burn the fiercer; or like climbing higher, which only enlarges the horizon of the desires." The only covetousness encouraged by the spirit of righteousness and the Word of the Lord is that mentioned by the Apostle, "Covet earnestly the best gifts" – the gifts of divine grace, which neither rob others, nor make God the poorer.
