

Invisible Sins

“You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you” (Luke 12:20a).

When we think of sin, we invariably think of murder, rape, theft, and other such visible, public sins. We could add lots more to this list, such as debauchery, rage, dissensions, drunkenness, and adultery. These (and yet more) are all overt, evident to others. But there are other kinds of sins that are invisible, not only to others but even to ourselves. I refer to the sins of character: Pride, envy, greed, and especially the most invisible of all, covetousness.

In the parable Jesus told in Luke 12 (it may not have been fictitious!), a certain rich man was specially blessed with a bountiful harvest from his land. He built larger barns than what he had to hold it all, saying, “I have plenty of good things laid up for many years, so I’ll take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool!” And Jesus ended the parable saying, “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

I suspect that the man in this parable didn’t realize how offensive he was to God. If he’d thought about his Scriptures, he would have known it. And God held him accountable because those Scriptures are there for him to know. And I’m certain that if any of us modern Americans were in the place of the man in this parable, we’d do exactly what he did and think the same as he said. So would Jesus be condemning us? Yes. The problem is . . . invisible sins, invisible even to us. Greed, envy, covetousness. We practice these thoughtlessly, completely unaware of how offensive such ugly character traits are to a holy God. These three related sins reveal a heart filled with illicit desire.

Greed is what false prophets have (2 Peter 2:3). They have an unrestrained lust for money. The man in this parable was greedy because he wanted his abundant harvest for himself. Greed appears often in Paul’s vice lists (Romans 1:29, for example); he associates it with wickedness and depravity, and deserving of death (verse 32). Greed characterizes unbelievers (Ephesians 4:19).

Envy is Satanic. Satan envied God’s rulership of creation. Cain envied his brother’s sacrifice to God being accepted. Pilate realized that it was because of envy that the leaders of Judea wanted to destroy Jesus (Matthew 27:18). There are quite a few examples of envy in the two books of Samuel. But Jonathan loved David instead of envying him. Love does not envy (1 Corinthians 13:4). Paul includes envy in his several vice lists. So does Peter (1 Peter 1:21). Envy involves resentment and borders on covetousness. Both envy and coveting involve desire for something that belongs to another person—and usually something that cannot be gotten.

Covetousness too means to lust for something that someone else has. But coveting is more intense than envy. Satan covets God’s rule and embodies evil. Balaam coveted money and did evil. David coveted Uriah’s wife and did something wicked. Nebuchadnezzar coveted Judea’s wealth. Herod coveted power and prestige. Paul says in Romans 7 that it was only by reflecting on the Law (the Tenth Commandment) that he realized that he was covetous [perhaps of prestige among the rabbis]. Paul condemns people who covet, likening it to idolatry (Ephesians 5:5). Covetousness is similar to greed. Even if we don’t do something evil, the coveting is offensive to God.

What does God expect of us? Selflessness. Having a pure heart. In love, being generous to others. Being just like God Himself is. Jesus was totally committed to honoring God, to serving God, to obeying God, to exalting God with His life, and He did these with consuming zeal. We’re to do the same. But, we can’t and we won’t. We’re too much like the man in the parable.

The man in the parable had a soul that was starved, although his body was luxuriously provided for. Same with us. We have a soul that doesn't feed on the Word of God, so we don't really know God, desire God, nor care about His will for us. Notice in this parable how many times the man referred to himself with "I," "my," "me," and "mine." His soul was narcissistic, he was madly in love with himself. He probably was aware of God's existence, but there was no love for God. The man also didn't realize that he owned nothing; God owns everything. Including ourselves. He furthermore didn't realize that this life is really a probation, a preparation for the next existence. And for that, we must be the kind of person that desires God and seeks to exalt God. We don't want some day to hear from God, "You fool!"

This man in the parable should have realized that God was the one who gave him a bounteous harvest, and he should have shared his good fortune with others, especially those in his region who were needy. He should have done it fully conscious that God cared about his life and that he was sharing his wealth deliberately to exalt God.

We suppose that because we're saved, this parable isn't relevant to us. Wrong! This instruction was written for believers. Luke wrote his Gospel for the Church. It's for us. Being "saved" doesn't obviate or supersede how we're to live. To the contrary, it heightens it! Our lives, our being, our character reveal the truth (or absence) of regeneration. Supposing that "God knows my heart" is no substitute for obedience, for being holy. The life of a real follower of Jesus is demanding. Everyone else, all who ignore being rich toward God, are . . . fools.

We today in evangelical churches are indifferent to the demands of following Christ because we're smug about our "salvation." We think (perhaps subconsciously), "I believe in Jesus. That's all I need to do." So we ignore the invisible sins that lie latent within our souls. We covet. We envy. And yes, we're greedy too. We don't know that we're doing these. And we don't care. "My sins are all forgiven. I'm going to be in heaven" we suppose. So I ask: Why, then, did Jesus give this instruction to His followers?

Many other sins than discussed here are invisible. For example, there's pride. Pride is painfully visible to others, but not at all to the proud one. God detests pride. It's Satanic. Too, we're in this "world," a complex, secular culture permeated with ungodly values, beliefs, priorities and ideas, and we can't help but absorb them just from living here. Modern Americans hold a worldview that's antithetical to godliness, and unless we carefully analyze it and despise it, we can't help but adopt it (or parts of it) as our own. Jude adds a few sins that also horrify God, but not us. For example, fault-finding, grumbling, speaking ill of invisible beings who are God's servants, such as Satan, and scoffing. We think these are trivial, maybe even normal. But they aren't. These all are invisible sins that contaminate us. Do we care?

We need to grasp how pervasive sin is and how ugly it makes us to God. Yes, God has done what's necessary to deal with sin. But the many commands in Scripture to not sin must mean that we are expected to engage actively in dealing with sin. It's as necessary to not sin as it is to do righteousness. We must do both. And to enable us do these, Christ has sent His Spirit into our lives. The gift of the empowering Spirit is the greatest blessing of the Gospel in this present life. But we must know the Word for the Spirit to work, and we have to yield to Him. To follow Christ is demanding!

Character counts. Our character is exceedingly important to God. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." Our character is expressed in what we desire and what we desire reflects our character. A pure heart is one that fervently desires God, to know Him, to be with Him, and that loathes sin in all its manifestations out of love for a holy God.

We're here to honor our Creator. We do that by being rich toward God.