

1 Kings 21: A Case Study in Covetousness

A Case Study in Covetousness

1 Kings 21 provides us with a rather obvious example of covetousness.

Ahab was king of Samaria—the northern kingdom of Israel.

The Israelite kingdom was divided between the northern kingdom of Israel
and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Ahab was a wicked king.

Not only did he follow in the footsteps of the wicked kings before him,
he compounded his sins by marrying a Gentile (Jezebel the Sidonian),
and bringing pagan worship into Israel.

In chapter 20 Ahab had just captured Ben-hadad, the king of Syria,
the great enemy of Israel,
but rather than put him to death, Ahab spares him

and after wresting certain concessions from him, sets him free.

But God sent a prophet to Ahab, condemning him for his treason.

Ben-hadad had not only slaughtered many thousands of Israelites,
he had also declared that God was only a god of the hills,
and had mocked Yahweh, God of Israel,
therefore he deserved to die the death of a blasphemer.

Ahab had demonstrated that he cared more for his own political gain,
than for the holiness of God’s name.

Here in chapter 21, Ahab is sulking.

God has rebuked him, but instead of repenting,
Ahab takes it out on Naboth.

Naboth has a vineyard that Ahab wants for a vegetable garden.

It takes years for a vineyard to come to maturity.

But Ahab doesn’t care.

He wants a vegetable garden.

There is only one other place where this phrase “vegetable garden” occurs:

In Deuteronomy 11:10 God had told his people

that the Promised Land was a land flowing with milk and honey—
not like *the land of Egypt . . .*

*where you sowed your seed and watered it by foot,
like a garden of vegetables,*

The Promised Land is a land that the LORD your God cares for.

In order to understand what is going on here we need to understand both Ahab's request and Naboth's response.

Think of the symbolism here.

Every day Ahab has to look out his window at this Israelite vineyard—
this symbol of the permanence of the blessing of Yahweh upon his people.
And he wants to turn it into a vegetable garden—
a symbol of the transience of Egypt.

Ahab is the antichrist, who is leading an assault on the inheritance of Israel,
turning the Promised Land into a waste land.

So you can appreciate why Naboth rejects Ahab's offer.

The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.

Leviticus 25 had clearly said that the land was inalienable.

Since the land belongs to God, and God had divided the land equitably between the tribes,
it was forbidden to accumulate land for oneself.

There was a theological principle at work here:

since Israel is the Son of God, the promised seed,
and since land and seed are inseparable,

therefore the seed should not be deprived of the land.

In short, Naboth believes God's promises.

God has said that Israel's inheritance is sacred and inalienable.

He will not trade the gift of God for the gift of a king.

Do you have the faith of Naboth?

Are you willing to trust the promises of God in the face of the temptations of the world?

Or do you respond to God's word like Ahab?

He lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat no food.

In modern terms, Ahab is suffering from depression.

But in biblical terms, Ahab is suffering from covetousness!

Sometimes (not all the time, but *sometimes*) depression is caused by sin.

And you can understand why.

When you refuse to listen to the Word of God,
you are refusing your proper function.

Your body and soul were designed to love and serve the living God.

When you refuse to do that,

it is not surprising that there can be physiological problems that result!

But while Ahab is throwing a tantrum in the palace,

Jezebel, his wife, goes out and gets Ahab what he wants.

The elders of Jezreel do as Jezebel says.

And then Jezebel goes to her husband and tells him to take possession of the land,
for Naboth is not alive, but dead.

And so Ahab took possession of the vineyard of Naboth,
symbolically destroying the vineyard of Israel
and turning it into the vegetable garden of Egypt.

The book of Kings portrays Ahab's family (the house of Omri)
in parallel with the house of David.

Those of you who are familiar with the story of David and Bathsheba
may wish to consider the parallels here.

David had killed a man in order to obtain Bathsheba,
and he was confronted by the prophet Nathan,
who told him that judgment would fall upon his house;
and though David repented, that did not prevent the judgment that came.
Further, what David did is "evil in the eyes of Yahweh"—precisely the language of 21:25.
As Nathan put it, "Why have you despised the word of Yahweh
to do what is evil in his sight."
Or as Elijah put it, "Because you have sold yourself
to do what is evil in the sight of Yahweh"

Indeed, both David and Ahab also repented.

Notice verses 27-29.

But whereas David bore the fruits of repentance and walked in humility before God,
Ahab did not.

Chapter 22 makes it clear that Ahab still hated the word of the LORD,
and refused to listen to the prophets.

The key difference is the heart.

Man sees the outward appearance,
but the LORD looks on the heart.

When the Word of the LORD came to Ahab,
his outward actions parallel the actions of David—
humbling himself, fasting and wearing sackcloth—
but his heart is still false:
he still covets.

Yes, God knew Ahab's heart.

He knew that Ahab's repentance was purely an external show,
but even he took Ahab at his word.

God has promised to forgive the sins of those who repent and turn to him in faith.
And God is faithful to his promises—even when we are not.

And yet God had mercy upon Ahab—for a time.

*And the Word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,
Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me?
Because he has humbled himself before me,
I will not bring the disaster in his days;
but in his son's days I will bring the disaster on his house.*

Why does God show mercy to such a wicked king as Ahab?

It is to reveal the simple truth
that no matter how kind and generous and merciful God is to the wicked,
in the end, they will self-destruct.

He will forgive the one who repents,
but as Hebrews 10 says, the one who rebels against Christ
has “profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified,
and has outraged the Spirit of grace.” (Heb 10:29)

The outward act of repentance must be matched with the inward heart of faith.
The difference between Ahab and David is that David's hope was in God,
and therefore his repentance bore the fruit of holiness,
as he clung to Christ for his salvation.

God listens to the voice of his anointed.

If God listened to the contrived voice of Ahab the most wicked of all kings,
then surely God will hear the petitions of his beloved Son who intercedes for us!

But in the end, coveting leads to death:

coveting led David to arrange the murder of Uriah,
which resulted in the death of the firstborn son of David and Bathsheba;
coveting led Ahab to arrange the murder of Naboth,
which resulted in the death of both Ahab and Jezebel.

As James puts it:

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?
Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?
You desire and do not have, so you murder.
You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” (James 4:1-2)

Psalm 119 points us in a different direction.

If the problem is that our desires are disoriented,
then we need new desires – we need a new heart –
we need an understanding heart – a heart that loves God's will.

So let's sing Psalm 119:33-40.
Read Luke 15

Introduction: Covetousness and Contentment

What do you covet?

Do you look at your neighbor's house, and desire it?
Do you look at your neighbor's wife, and desire her?

Or is your coveting of a different sort?

Do you desire status?
Do you long for the praise of others?
Do you look at others and wish that you had their position? their gifts? their abilities?

Whatever you covet,

God calls you to repent.
And he calls you to contentment.
Are you content with what God has set before you to do?
It may be a small place.
But you may be content in a small place,
being faithful in that which Christ has given you to do.

Let's set the tenth commandment in its context:

The first three commandments deal specifically with our relationship to God:

You shall have no other gods before me
You shall not make any graven image and bow down to it
You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.

Then the next two commandments deal with time and authority:

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy
Honor your father and your mother

The next four commandments then deal with our relations with our neighbors:

You shall not kill
You shall not commit adultery
You shall not steal
You shall not bear false witness

If you read the first nine commandments superficially
you might think that you are doing pretty well!

I worship God, I honor my parents,
I don't kill, commit adultery, steal or lie.
I'm doing pretty well!

But in the tenth commandment God strikes at the heart of our complacency and pride.

Because in the tenth commandment God makes it clear
that his law is not merely concerned with externals.
It reaches the very heart of man.

If you keep all the commandments outwardly –
that doesn't mean that you are righteous!
You have to keep them all *inwardly* as well.

Q. 79. *Which is the tenth commandment?*

A. The tenth commandment is, You shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbor's.

The tenth commandment deals first with our tendency
to want those things that belong to our neighbor.
In other words, our refusal to be content with what God has given to us.
Indeed, in its explication of the tenth commandment,
our Shorter Catechism focuses on contentment:

Q. 80. *What is required in the tenth commandment?*

A. The tenth commandment requires full contentment with our own condition, with a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor, and all that is his.

Q. 81. *What is forbidden in the tenth commandment?*

A. The tenth commandment forbids all discontentment with our own estate, envying or grieving at the good of our neighbor, and all inordinate motions and affections to anything that is his.

We don't use the word "inordinate" very often –
but it's an important word.

"Ordinate" affections are properly functioning affections.

When you are loving God with all your heart – and your neighbor as yourself –
that is our proper function – and those are "ordinate affections."

If I love my neighbor, then I rejoice at the good things that God has given him.

I may think, "I would really like a house like that someday,"
but I do not desire *his house*.

On the other hand, *inordinate* affections are affections that are misdirected.

When you love the creature rather than the Creator –
then you wish that *you* had what *your neighbor* has.

When your desires are *ordinate* then you are content.

When your desires are *inordinate* then you are not content.

And we see this illustrated for us in the parable of the two malcontents.
(More commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son).

1. The Parable of the Two Malcontents (Luke 15)

The younger son is plainly not content.

He demands his inheritance early,
and takes it and squanders it in reckless living.
Giving in to his covetous heart,
he pursues his desires and ends up penniless and alone.
But then he comes to his senses and returns to his father—
plainly symbolizing our repentance and returning to God.
And when he comes to his father,
he begs him to take him on—not as a son, but as a servant.

But when he comes to his Father,
his Father is watching for him.
He sees him while still a long ways off.

How do you picture this scene?

Do you see a rural villa surrounded by fields?
the son walking over a hill?
a quiet reunion in a country byway?

Sorry.
That won't do!

In the ancient world, everyone lived in the village.
This is not a rural scene with only two people in view.

This is a village scene—a public scene.

And here is the Father, one of the wealthy villagers—
probably one of the elders of the town—
running through the village.

Imagine Jay DeRoos or Rolf Caylor sprinting down Main Street!
But imagine Jay DeRoos or Rolf Caylor sprinting down Main Street in a long garment
that reaches down to his feet.

In order to run, he would have to gird up his loins, bare his legs,
and make a complete scene in front of the whole village.

In the ancient world, dignified men do not run.

In other words, it would be something like the public shock
of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners.

This is just something that you *do not do*.

But the Father ran and embraced his son.

This is a public act.

He does this out in the street before the whole village.

He does not wait for his son to speak.

He runs to him, embraces him and kisses him.

This is what God has done in Jesus Christ.

He came to the tax collectors and sinners,

and publicly he welcomed them home.

Jesus says to the Pharisees, you grumble because I eat with tax collectors and sinners?

It's worse than that!

I run down the road when I see lost sons,

and I shower them with kisses and I welcome them home!

Not only does the Father welcome his son with open arms,

he also dresses him in the best robe, with a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.

He is arrayed in the finest garments—dressed like a prince.

And the Father invites the whole village

(a fattened calf could feed at least 100 people).

Just in the last two chapters of Luke, Jesus has been talking about the banquet.

13:28—"In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,

when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets
in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out."

14:24—"For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my banquet."

Jesus is making it crystal clear that the religious leaders of his day

will have no place at the banquet of the Father.

Now the father calls his friends and neighbors to come together and rejoice,

because *this my son was dead, and is alive again;*

he was lost, and is found. (15:24)

He had squandered the inheritance, and had repudiated his sonship.

There was nothing he could do to regain his sonship.

But God, who is full of mercy, gives life to the dead.

The Father was the one who restored his exiled son—

who found the wanderer and gave him life.

And called together the whole neighborhood to rejoice and celebrate.

But...

Now we get to hear of the second malcontent.

The elder son has not given in to his desires.

No, indeed, he is self-disciplined and a hard worker.

He has devoted himself to serving his father—
the very model of a faithful son, isn't he?

Covetousness, like all sin, is deceitful.

It masks itself under the guise of faithfulness and righteousness.

I am not covetous, I just want what is right.

“Dad, you're not being fair!

My brother was naughty, but now you're paying all this attention to him!

I'm the good child, don't I deserve more?”

The father's response sees through his discontent:

“All that is mine is yours.”

Son, your brother squandered his whole inheritance.

Everything that's left is yours.

You are the owner of my whole estate, and yet you are not content.

Your brother has nothing, but he is now content,
if only he can eat at my table.

The father never says that the younger son is going to get anything more.

It's gone.

The younger son is content with his inheritance as a servant.

He has learned the secret of contentment.

The older son has everything!

But he cannot be content with everything.

And so he covets the nothing that his brother receives!

2. A Case Study in Contentment (Naboth and Ahab)

To understand this better, let's go back to Naboth.

Naboth is offered a better vineyard,
but he doesn't want it.

If he was the covetous sort,
he was in a good position.

The king wanted his vineyard,
and might pay very dearly for it!

But Naboth replies, “Yahweh forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.”

Leviticus 25:23 made it clear that “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity,
for the land is mine.” (Cf. Numb. 36:7)

Each piece of land was supposed to remain within the family.

Land and seed were bound intimately together.

The land was not your *property* to be disposed of as you wished,
it was your inheritance—the symbol of God’s promised rest.
As long as your family continued to live in that land,
you were participating in the visible sign of eternal life—
the foretaste of heaven.

Naboth believed God’s promises.
And he was content with that inheritance.
Content enough that he did not fear the power of the king.
Therefore, Naboth died in faith—murdered by Jezebel’s henchmen.
He deserves a place among the heroes of Hebrews 11:37,
those who were stoned to death for their faith.

Are you content in your inheritance?

We don’t have a piece of real estate as the token of our inheritance today!
We have something better!
We have the Holy Spirit.

Naboth had the glory of God dwelling in a temple of stone in the middle of the land.
We have the glory of God dwelling in a temple of living stones,
dwelling in our hearts by faith.

Or, as Peter puts it,

“According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading,
kept in heaven for you,
who by God’s power are being guarded through faith
for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”
(1 Peter 1:3-5)

In Christ, you have an inheritance that is worth anything (everything!).
What more can you want?

Well, there is one thing more.

3. The Secret of Contentment (Habakkuk 3)

Yes, the solution to covetousness is to be content with our inheritance,
but that does not mean complacency.

The prophet Habakkuk wrote in a day when the inheritance of God’s people was under attack.
Babylon is coming.

The promised land is about to become a wasteland.

Habakkuk 3 begins with the prophet’s plea for action:

“O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear.

In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known;
in wrath, remember mercy.” (3:2)

I’ve heard about what you have done, O LORD.

But I’ve never seen it.

The central verses of this chapter recall God’s great saving acts in history.

Verses 4-15 echo the language of the plagues of Egypt at the Exodus

along with the victory at Gibeon in Joshua 10, when the sun stood still (11)

Together with these specific events are the general references

to God’s triumphs over the nations (the Davidic conquests).

I’ve heard of this, LORD.

And I long to see it in our day!

Here is a beautiful picture of *ordinate* desires!

I desire to *see* today the mighty deeds that I have *heard* in the past.

I love God – and I want to see *thy kingdom come!*

But I don’t see it now.

And what’s worse, it’s going to get worse.

We’re about to go into Exile.

The Promised Land is about to become a desert.

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,

the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,

the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls”

When your inheritance is reduced to barrenness and emptiness–

what is your response?

“I will rejoice in the Lord my salvation, he is my strength, my delight,

he makes me run with the feet of the deer, he makes me walk on the heights.”

If the basic message of the Bible is “Salvation belongs to the LORD” (Jonah 2:9),

then the basic prayer of the Bible is “Make haste, O God, to save me!” (Ps 70:1),

and the basic praise of the Bible is “I will rejoice in the Lord, my salvation!”

And when this is the orientation of your heart –

then you are content,

because you know that in Christ, your inheritance can never be taken away!

Sing Habakkuk 3