Envy – Lust of the Eyes

Shaun Brauteseth 13 November 2026



App. Open. Friends on some holiday trip. Swipe sideways. Happy faces. They're in good shape. Scroll. Friend at gym, glowing. Scroll. Search. Scroll. Fashion tips from some European kid. Ah. Turns out I'm wearing everything wrong, in all the wrong colours, all the time. Sigh. Scroll. Celebrity transformations. Wow. That is a radical weight loss. Scroll. Haircuts. Scroll. Photos You Won't Believe Are Real. Scroll. Radical makeover. Wait, is this fake? I can't tell anymore. Scroll. Justin Bieber is getting out of a car. Looks sad. Scroll. 15 Restaurants You Need To … Scroll. Sneakers. Scroll. Hats. Scroll. Beautiful people. Scroll. Those are the whitest teeth I've ever seen. Scroll. The most stunning places on earth. Scroll.

It's hard to believe that any single person has finished a session on social media by feeling happy about themselves. We generally don't come away from our little window into the world with a renewed sense of purpose and vision; rather, we often feel demotivated, listless. Of course, this isn't news – we figured it out pretty quickly in the age of smartphones. Books have been written about it, studies conducted, alarms raised, even increasingly restrictive legislation implemented. National governments are realising what a problem this is but don't know what to do about it. Bottom line: we know it damages us and no rational person disputes that fact, but we find it incredibly difficult to stop engaging with it. The poison tastes good. But this isn't another think-piece about the perils of social media. This is about something that would prefer

not to be named. A very old, ugly word. An archaic term that the world scoffs at. A Jurassic concept, an ancient, unnoticeable vice. A sin, actually. And more than that: a very specific, almost unique sin – one that props up much of what we see, has no sign of slowing down, and wants to define our generation.

Coveting.

It means wanting something we're not supposed to want: wanting something that belongs to someone else. It means not being grateful for what we have. It's born out of discontent, and it's never satisfied. Coveting wealth, for example, rarely leads to someone feeling they eventually have enough; coveting pleasure rarely leads to someone feeling they are content; coveting attention rarely leads to someone feeling they are fulfilled. It's an old sin with new avenues, new opportunities, new shapes, new angles. It's an ugly thing in a beautiful package, and if we're ever going to do anything about it, the best thing we can do is to actually understand it before we try to fight it. A fool sets out to wage war against an enemy he doesn't understand, and if we can pin down what this thing actually is and why it's such a problem, we'll be in a better position to resist its power.

> If coveting is a poison, thankfulness is the antidote. Thankfulness for the gift of Jesus, and also thankfulness for the many good things God has given to us.

The apostle Paul's letter to the Roman church is surely the most sprawling, generous piece of writing we possess from all of antiquity. It's no ordinary document; for one thing, it is significantly longer than almost any body of text that has survived from that time period. A typical letter from the same age contained around 90 words; Paul's letter to Rome clocks in at 7,114. To call it rich in theology is a dramatic understatement: nearly seventy Old Testament passages are directly referenced, and Paul makes probably the single most compelling case for justification by faith that has ever been committed to papyrus. And there, deep in the letter that we call Romans, deep in the middle of Paul's argument, early in chapter seven, he drops a bomb. He has already dictated a detailed journey through man's sinfulness, God's proper and correct condemnation, the gift of Jesus that saves us from that judgment, and the concept of receiving that gift through faith. Now he's invoking the Law of Moses, and how its clear boundaries and prohibitions didn't curtail sin – it actually provoked it, exposed it, brought it to the surface.

And, poignantly, he chooses a particular sin as an example: Coveting.

"For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'You shall not

covet,'" Paul says. **"**But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good."
–Romans 7:7-12, NIV

It's an utterly stunning statement. It's also illuminating in a particular way. Think about what he's saying: Suddenly he's presented with God's command to stop doing what comes as naturally as breathing, and his heart is suddenly exposed. All kinds of covetous desires well up in him immediately; the more he understands how wrong it is, the more he wants to do it. But it would seem that Paul didn't pick the sin of coveting as a random example. In fact, the command against coveting occupied an interesting place in the law God gave to his people. It appears Paul wasn't arbitrarily picking a sin out of a hat to prove a point. He had this one in mind – this sin that still wreaks havoc in our lives today everywhere we turn. And to understand why he invoked this sin in particular, we must go to the Law itself.

The Ten Commandments, outlined in Exodus 20, were not the only commandments given to God's people. But in some way they were a condensed version, a set of categories into which all the commandments could fit. The thing about the Ten Commandments, though, is that at a glance it feels entirely possible to keep them. Think about it:

Have no other gods.
Do not make and worship idols.
Do not misuse God's name.
Keep the Sabbath holy.
Honour your father and mother.
Do not murder.
Do not commit adultery.
Do not steal.
Do not give false testimony.

Look at that list. The negative prohibitions were avoidable, and the positive instructions could be pursued with discipline and diligence. You could look at that list, set your mind on keeping its instructions, and actually do it. But those are nine of the commandments. The biggest problem with the Ten Commandments is the tenth one. The very last one, patiently sitting at the bottom of the list, daring you to read it and then examine your own heart:

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”
– Exodus 20:17, NIV

That command, those thirty-one words, shatter everything. I may have mentally checked myself during the first nine commandments, feeling quite confident – like the young man who approached Jesus in Matthew 19:20 – but by the end I’m backed into a corner. The command against coveting exposes what is in our hearts. The more we are told not to do it, the more we want to do it. The more we clench our jaws and decide we will not covet something that is not ours, the more we find ourselves doing it without even trying. We are not victims of the desire for things that aren’t ours – we’re coveting factories, mass-producing unauthorised desire by the truckload. What hope is there for us? How are we supposed to live? What should we do?

“What a wretched man I am!” cries Paul a little later, in the 24th verse of Romans 7, faced with the same question. “Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” It’s an appropriate question in our generation, when so many ad campaigns, so many videos, so many movies are calling us, drawing us into a spiral of covetousness. Who will rescue us? Praise God that Paul answers his own question.

“Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” – Romans 7:25, NIV

That answer has two elements to it, and both are absolutely necessary in daily fighting the poison of covetousness. Firstly, Paul invokes Jesus, by whom we are all delivered from our sin and from the accompanying judgment of God that we deserve. Jesus is all we have, but He’s also all we need. Our debt, His payment; our sin, His sacrifice; our rebellion, His redemption. All we ever brought to the table was sin and destruction, and Jesus has taken it upon Himself.

What theologians call the ‘divine exchange’ is not some cute little phrase that we jot down in our notebooks in order to sleep better at night – it is the single biggest, most powerful, most stunning and mystifying transaction that has ever taken place. Paul felt utterly helpless against the desires that rose up in his heart, but it pointed him to Jesus, who is able to break the power of sin over our lives, and who is able to deliver us from a slavery which would be inevitable without Him. That’s the first thing.

But secondly, I see something else. It’s the word that starts his response: thanks. If coveting is a poison, thankfulness is the antidote. Thankfulness for the gift of Jesus, and also thankfulness for the many good things God has given to us. Coveting wants to erase our thankfulness, cause us to grumble, to forget, to overlook God’s blessings to us. But being thankful is a weapon. We are instructed to “enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise” in Psalm 100:4,

because that really is the appropriate response to a God who is so good and so kind to us. The Israelites were repeatedly told to remember what God had done for them, to write it down and teach it to their children; it was one of the main things that would prevent them from going after other gods, from coveting the sin of the nations around them. Paul set his sights on Jesus and he was thankful, and two thousand years later that is still an extremely good plan of action.

> And above all, there is Jesus. We dare not think we will never covet the things of this world, but we also dare not think God cannot deliver us from being enslaved to those desires.

We are going to continue to see enticing posters in shopping centres; we are going to continue to be targeted by ad campaigns that deliberately make us feel discontent; we are going to see edited, carefully curated images of people who look like we want to look, who are doing the things we want to do; we are going to wish we had more, wish we were more attractive, wish we had made different decisions, wish we had better life circumstances. These things come at us every day, and they're going to keep coming hard and fast.

But there is hope. We are not victims, and this is not a foregone conclusion for the people of God. There is grace for us in our weakness; there is the power to overcome; there is the ability to be disciplined; there is thankfulness; there is the precious Holy Spirit who leads us away from the things of this world. And above all, there is Jesus. We dare not think we will never covet the things of this world, but we also dare not think God cannot deliver us from being enslaved to those desires. He can deliver us. After all, it was Jesus Himself who declared, as a rich young man walked away, that with man things are impossible, but with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). All things.

And so today, again, the question: In a world that celebrates what God forbids, who will save us? Who will help us?
And today, again, the answer: Thanks be to God, who delivers us through Jesus Christ our Lord.