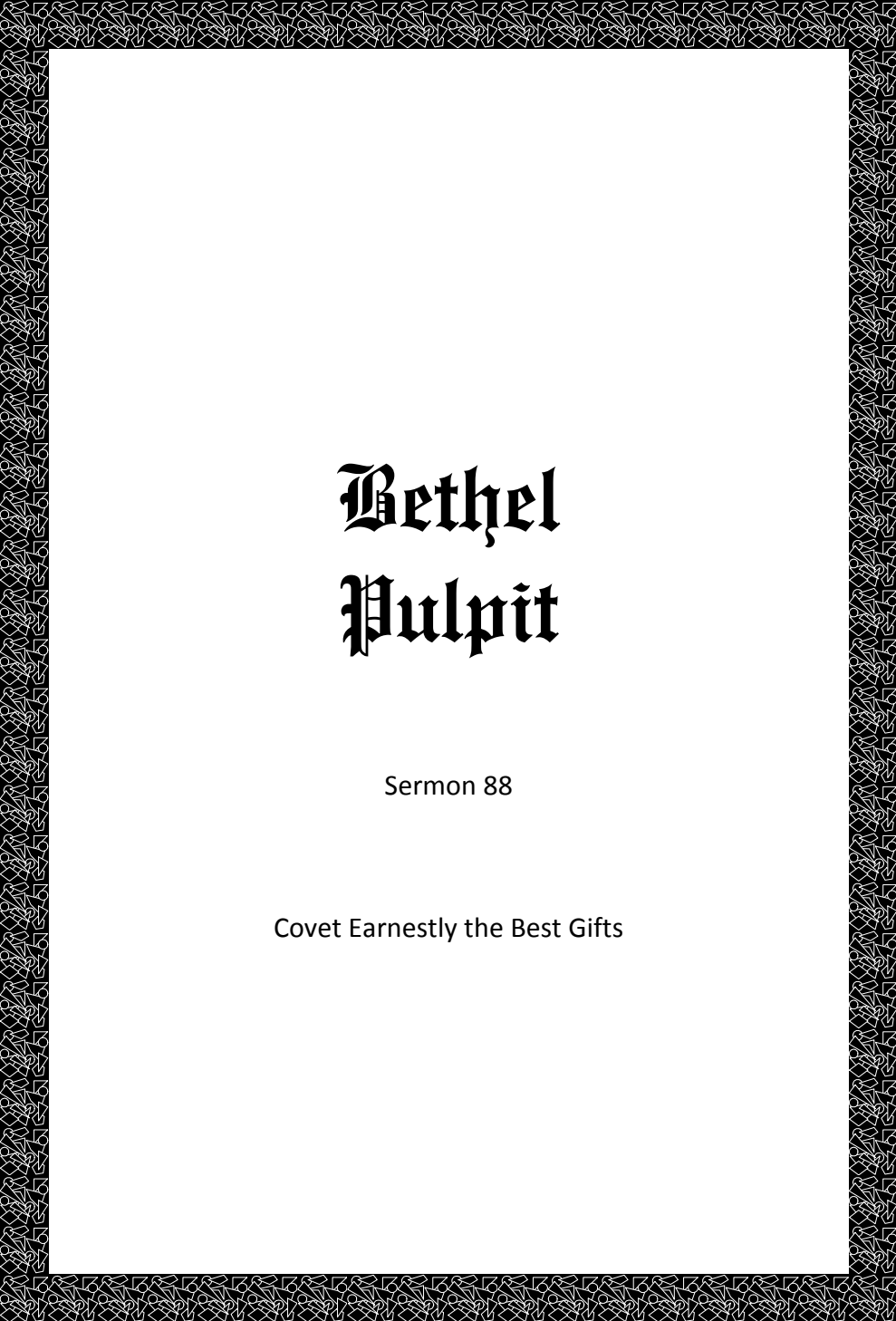




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 88

Covet Earnestly the Best Gifts

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 16th December, 1990**

Text: *"But covet earnestly the best gifts" (1 Corinthians 12. 31).*

Let me just first of all try to set this word in its context. The church at Corinth was a very gifted church and gloried in the gifts God had bestowed on it. But there seemed to be more gifts in the church than there was grace. There is a difference between grace and gifts. All God's people are blessed with grace, every one of them. But there are gifts in greater or less measure. Some are given gifts for office in the church of God. Some are given gifts in other ways. In this chapter, the church is compared to a body and each part of the body has a gift. The tongue has the gift of speaking; other parts of the body do not have this gift. The hands have special gifts; they can do all kinds of things which other parts cannot do. The mind has the gift of thinking, and so on. It is a solemn thing if there is a church with no gifts. If God blesses that church with grace and withholds all these gifts, that will be a weak church. But it is an unspeakably solemn thing if a church is blessed with gifts but not much grace. A truly spiritual church will have a balance of grace and gifts.

The fault with the church at Corinth was this: they were badly wanting some sensational gifts. In the early days of the Christian church, there were some sensational gifts. Some had the ability to heal the sick. Others had the ability to speak with tongues. Others had the ability to speak a word of prophecy, what was going to take place. We believe these outward, sensational gifts belonged only to apostolic times. In the professing Christian church at present, this is perhaps one of the greatest divides of all and one of the greatest points of controversy, with some churches claiming the gifts which were limited to the apostles themselves. The church at Corinth was a prosperous church in many ways, but the people were glorying in these outward gifts, these more sensational gifts. Paul does not for one moment discount the value of these gifts, but in the context when he says, "Covet earnestly the best gifts," he does not mean sensational things, remarkable things, but the things which would be more useful for the good of the church and more to the honour and glory of God.

Lingering on this aspect of the subject for the moment, “Covet earnestly the best gifts,” if the church of God is compared to a body, then every single member is useful and necessary, and if any single member of the body, the church, fails to function in the use to which the Lord has appointed it, that is a weakening of the church. The comparison right through is the body: what would happen if one hand fails to function, or if the eyes fail to function, or if one of the feet fails to function? You see, church members, what an awful, solemn responsibility is laid on you concerning your profession, your actions, your behaviour. May we always consider this: if every church member walked in the way in which I walk, behaved in the way I behave, acted in the way I act, what kind of a church would ours be?

There are different, varying gifts bestowed on the members of the church of Christ, and you should know what gift is bestowed upon you. One person has a gift of teaching in the Sabbath school. Another person just does not have that gift. It is not that one is better than the other or more godly than the other. It is the sovereignty of God in the bestowal of gifts. Here you are encouraged to seek for these best gifts – not showy, sensational things; but in some way, greater or smaller, you will be gifted and the purpose will be to use that gift for the edification and the stability of the church here at Bethel and for the honour and glory of God. Now there may be some spiritual gift you would like to have. May you be able earnestly to pray for it, on these two conditions: that it is for the welfare of the church, the local church, and for the honour and glory of God.

I just take one point up here as an illustration and an example. For a long time now I have earnestly coveted a spirit of intercessory prayer. In past days some of the dear saints of God were very humble people. They did not say much, but they were given such a spirit of wrestling, prevailing prayer, not just for themselves, though it began with themselves, but for the church of God, and for God’s blessing to rest on His Word. Or there may have been particular persons laid on their hearts, and they wrestled until they saw the answer to their prayers. That is the gift which at one time was very abundant in the church of God. What about that one who does not seem to be touched by the Word? Well, is there anyone here labouring in prevailing prayer until the Word has free course and is glorified? What about that one in darkness and bondage? Is there anyone wrestling in prayer that that one might be set at liberty? What about that

one in affliction? Is there one here pleading that the Lord would appear for them? I mention this as one example of the best gifts, these outward gifts, and may we as a church earnestly covet them, pray for them, and may we possess them.

I just say these few things at the beginning to set this word in its context. Now I want to speak of it this morning in its more general sense as we have it in the Word of God, those blessed gifts that God gives, those gifts which are the best gifts. Why are those spiritual gifts which God gives, the blessings of His grace, the blessings of His salvation, the best gifts? Really for two reasons. Firstly, because they will take you to heaven. Someone may give you a million pounds, but it will not take you to heaven. But if you possess these best gifts when you die, they will take you to heaven. Then secondly, if you have these best gifts, you can never lose them. You might have a most precious possession. Someone may have given it to you. You may highly value it. You may have it locked away in a safe place. But the time may come when you lose it. These gifts of salvation, these spiritual gifts, will take you to heaven when you die, but until then you can never lose them. Some of you have known what a sad experience it is when you have had something really valuable and you have lost it; you have not been able to find it, or someone has taken it from you, or you have lost it in this sense: it has worn out, or grown old. Now these best gifts can never wear out, never grow old. Covet them earnestly.

“Covet earnestly the best gifts.” This word “covet” – covetousness is one of the strongest passions there is. If a person is really under the influence of a covetous spirit, there is something he so badly wants or there are many things he so badly wants, that he cannot find any peace, he cannot find any rest, he cannot find any satisfaction. He is miserable, he is disappointed, and there is only one thing really that captivates his heart and mind and soul, and that is to get these things he wants, to get these possessions he wants. Covetousness is one of the strongest passions anyone can ever know. The world today is absolutely plagued with covetousness. We live in a covetous generation. People are never really satisfied. Whatever they get, they want more. If you go round the streets and the shops at this time of the year, then you see covetousness. It is very easy for people to become covetous, people thinking, “What am I going to receive this year? What is someone going to give me? How nice will it be?” There is this covetous spirit. It is one of the effects of the Fall.

Since Adam fell, the human race has been plagued with this spirit of covetousness, always wanting something here below, wanting something better, wanting something greater.

Covetousness. Throughout Scripture, covetousness is most solemnly forbidden again and again. Sometimes there is a terrible list of the great sins – adultery, fornication, murder – and in the mist of this dreadful catalogue there is covetousness. In one place we are told that covetousness is idolatry. You would not think much of idolatry. Covetousness is idolatry. It is this terrible passion, this strong passion, which will not give way until it has what it wants. Then at first it seems almost a solemn shock, almost startling, that Paul should use this word, *covet*, because we believe in the verbal inspiration of Scripture. We believe he chose this word as moved by the Holy Ghost. “*Covet earnestly the best gifts*” – as if these best gifts, these spiritual gifts, these gifts of salvation, are so blessed and so valuable and so precious that there is no other word strong enough. *Seek* them, *pray* for them, *ask* for them. But the Holy Spirit goes right beyond all these things, and says, “*Covet* them.” Go back again to that man of the world. He is miserable. He wants something and cannot find any peace, any satisfaction, until he has it. It is the only thing which fills his thoughts. Now, says Paul, that is how you and I should be concerning the blessings of the gospel, the blessings of salvation. We should be coveting them like that, that intensity of spirit, that earnest longing, that desire, completely discontented, dissatisfied, until we have them. Nothing else really matters.

“Covet earnestly the best gifts.” Let me appeal to some of you here this morning. Some of us can go back to those days when we did covet earnestly the best gifts, can’t we? There was eternity before us, a never-ending eternity, ourselves unfit to die, and the judgment day, and heaven or hell before us. We saw our only hope in the gospel, these best gifts in the Lord Jesus. Didn’t we earnestly covet them? Wasn’t there that longing for them? Nothing else really mattered. We were not so concerned about what was going on in the world, and the things we once enjoyed we could enjoy them no longer. It was one thing and one thing alone. We knew what it was earnestly to covet the best gifts.

Well, as if the word *covet* is not strong enough (and what a strong word it is!) he adds this word *earnestly* to it. “Covet *earnestly* the best

gifts.” The world is in earnest, and if ever there is a time of year when the world is in earnest, it is this season at present. Look at the world going after its pleasures and enjoyments, and you see the world in earnest. The solemn thing is this: so often we are not in earnest. Let me appeal to you: in your young days when you used to go in that mad search after pleasure, you were earnest then, but are we as earnest now in our search after eternal blessings? “Covet earnestly the best gifts.” May the Holy Ghost bestow this spirit of earnestness upon us. Have you ever mingled with a football crowd? They are not talking about the weather. There is only one thing that matters, and there is the earnestness, the excitement. But we have something better.

I believe one weak point concerning the witness of the professing church of God is that outsiders cannot see that we are really earnest. You parents in your home, when your children look on you, do they see your earnestness in the things of God, that the things of God must always come first, that Christ and Him crucified is the only thing that matters? Or is it a half-hearted religion? This word is a solemn rebuke to each one of us. “The world is too much with us.” A secular poet, Wordsworth, said that. “The world is too much with us.” This word is a rebuke to each one: “Covet earnestly the best gifts.” But what about the witness of the church? What about the children when they look on church members? What about the world when it looks on church members? What about our young people when they look on church members? Do they say, “There is a man, a woman, a girl, a boy; I can’t understand them but I know their religion comes first; I know their religion is the only thing that matters”?

“Covet earnestly the best gifts.” I remember in my university days there was a place I attended and there was a much-esteemed man at this place of worship. There did not seem to be much about him outwardly from any point of view, but they told me about him. They said, “He is a good man: always, in everything he puts the things of God first.” What a witness! A man with no special ability, but he bears this witness, that he always puts the things of God first.

“Covet earnestly the best gifts.” So this is a strange expression. But let us be clear, the Word of God never exaggerates. Sometimes we do, but the Word of God never exaggerates, and the Word of God bids you,

bids me “covet earnestly the best gifts.” Let them be the only things that really matter. Let them come first, before everything else.

“Covet earnestly the best gifts.” Well, this time of the year is a time for the giving of gifts. In Bible days they were not strangers to this. If you read through the Book of Esther, you find that when the Jews had that very wonderful deliverance from destruction, they set up a feast and it was a time of giving presents one to another. There was just one thing – especially they had to remember the poor. So this came right down to New Testament times. It was a custom among the Jewish nation that when the Feast of Purim came round each year, in remembrance of that wonderful deliverance, it was “a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another.” So it was a custom in ancient Israel; it was a custom in the days of the Lord Jesus; it is a custom amongst us. This is a time for the giving of gifts. What about the best gifts? I want to appeal to you, and I want you to be honest before God. I suppose all of you are thinking that you might be given this or that or something else, or perhaps you do not know what it is going to be. Is there one person here this morning who has to say,

“These can never satisfy:
Give me Christ, or else I die”?

Is there another one who can say,

“Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
All in all in Thee I find”?

What would make you most happy on the day we remember the Saviour’s birth – to get a magnificent present, such as you have never had before, or to have the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Do not give the answer you feel you ought to give, but be honest before God. So often we say these things because we feel we ought to say them.

There is a very apt scripture in one of the early Psalms. “There be many that say, Who will shew us any good?” Well, we can bear witness to that. “There be many that say, Who will shew us any good?” What can we have? What will someone give us? “There be many that say, Who will shew us any good? Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.” That is the difference between a sinner taught by grace, between a sinner coveting earnestly the best gifts, and a sinner coveting worldly gifts.

“There be many that say, Who will shew us any good? Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.” Then he says this: “Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased.” The reference there is to harvest. In ancient Israel, the happiest day of the year, the day of most rejoicing, was when the harvest was safely gathered in. They had the feasting and the rejoicing. It was a time of wonderful happiness. Now, says this sinner as the Lord has shone into his heart, I have something better than the joy of harvest. I have something more lasting, more real. “Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased.”

Well, you might say the equivalent in England is Christmas Day. Thou hast put joy into my heart more than all these outward things on Christmas Day. Be honest before God. What would really put joy into your heart? Let me just repeat it to you again, and look it up when you go home: “There be many that say, Who will shew us any good? Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us. Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased.” “But covet earnestly the best gifts.”

“A bleeding Saviour seen by faith,
A sense of pardoning love,
A hope that triumphs over death,
Give joys like those above.”

Then covet earnestly these best gifts. This is the Holy Ghost’s work in the soul – a sinner quickened into life. Grace makes that sinner lively. Then there is not just the seeking, the asking, the praying, but this coveting earnestly the best gifts. You are encouraged to do this. No-one is forbidden to do it. It is a word of counsel, advice, direction, encouragement. It comes also as a word of rebuke. The implication is, if you are graciously enabled to do so, you will receive these best gifts.

This is an inexhaustible subject. This is like the ocean. Well, first of all, the Lord Jesus Himself – the best gift. “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” In the second Epistle to the Corinthians the Apostle is speaking about various gifts, and he deals with the whole subject of the stewardship of money, and how it should be given. At the end he says, “Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift.”

Can we ever thank the eternal Father enough for the gift of His own beloved Son? That lovely hymn of thanksgiving:

“His only Son He deigned to give;
What love this gift declares!
And all that in the Son believe,
Eternal life is theirs.”

“Covet earnestly the best gifts” – the Father’s gift of His own dear Son. “When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law.” He freely gave Him, even to death that He might make an atonement for sin. He gave Him for sinners. Now covet earnestly these best gifts: a saving interest in the Lord Jesus, a vital, personal knowledge of Him, because eternal life is in it. O, this gift of the Lord Jesus, this gift of God’s beloved Son, and this gift of every blessing in Him, this gift of eternal life! “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” It is a free-grace gift. It is an undeserved gift. May you know something of the blessings of free grace, that these gifts are completely undeserved. “And if free grace, why not for me?” Sin pays wages. We sin, and God is fair; God is just. “The wages of sin is death.” If a man works hard, then he gets the wages which have been promised. God has promised sinners wages, and the wages are death, eternal death. It is something completely fair, something completely deserved. If you and I go on, and we live and continue and die in our sin, then at last God as a fair master will give us our wages, and “the wages of sin is death” – eternal death, everlasting death. “But the gift of God” – not wages, not something deserved – “the *gift* of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

“Covet earnestly the best gifts,” and above all the dear Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ Himself. Then the gift of the Holy Spirit. What a gift! We need the Holy Spirit to lead us, to teach us, to reveal Christ to us, to help us to pray, to enable us to repent and to believe, to cause us to understand God’s Word. If we know anything personally, vitally, savingly, it is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is the gift of the eternal Father, and the gift of the eternal Son. The Father was not created. The Son of God was not created, but He was begotten of the Father. The Holy Spirit was neither created nor begotten, but He proceeds from the

Father and also from the Son. Now we do need the Holy Spirit. He is the Father's gift and you are encouraged to pray for Him. Now listen. How beautifully and simply does God speak of the gift of the Holy Spirit! He says, if there was a father and one of his little children came to him, and was hungry, and asked for a piece of bread, do you think the loving father would give him a stone? Or if instead on another occasion he asked him for a piece of fish, do you think the loving father would give him a poisonous snake? The language, the argument is very simple. "If ye then" – earthly fathers, earthly parents – "if ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children:" – now this is it – "how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?"

"Covet earnestly the best gifts." There are a multitude of these best gifts: salvation, an interest in the Saviour's precious blood, that glorious righteousness, to be covered in it, to have some part in the Saviour's advocacy and His all-prevailing intercession. "Covet earnestly the best gifts." But may the Lord reveal to you that they are the best gifts. And things like this: repentance – no salvation, no hope, no heaven without it. But it is a gift. May we covet earnestly that soft heart which trembles at the approach of sin. May we earnestly covet real repentance (a bitter-sweet grace), that we may mourn over our sins and after Christ. And faith, that we may be made true believers. Those of you who feel plagued by an evil heart of unbelief – covet earnestly that best gift of faith, to be made a real believer. It is one of the best gifts. What about the holy, tender fear of God? There are so many precious promises to those who possess it. It is one of the best gifts. Covet it earnestly, because God has promised to give it. As you read the Scriptures and listen to preaching, there may be one blessing you specially long for. Perhaps one of you longs to have a precious glimpse by faith of Calvary. Or another one specially longs for some special promise to be applied to you. Or you might look on some other special blessing, as, O that I might know that sweet assurance that I am a child of God! If there is some blessing which specially attracts you, covet it earnestly as one of the best gifts, for the Lord will not deny it to you. He will not say, No.

"Covet earnestly the best gifts." Perhaps one thing above all else at this time of the year is the wonderful, amazing love of Christ to lost, ruined, guilty sinners. Don't some of you long to know it? Don't some of

you long to possess it, to feel it? Wouldn't that satisfy you, if at this season you just felt the love of Christ in your heart?

“O love divine, how sweet thou art!
When shall I find my willing heart
All taken up by Thee?
I thirst, and faint, and die to prove
The greatness of redeeming love,
The love of Christ to me.”

Now this is one of the best gifts, the wonderful love the Lord Jesus showed in coming from heaven to earth, the wonderful love in His holy life, and sin-atoning death, the wonderful love He still shows even today in heaven. O to know it, to feel it, to experience it in our hearts!

“He left His radiant throne on high!
Left the bright realms of bliss!
And came to earth to bleed and die!
Was ever love like this?”

“Covet earnestly the best gifts.”