

The Problem with Greed
Luke 12:13-21
July 31, 2016

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

I’m going to say a word and I want you to visualize a person, either real or fictitious. The word is: Greed. So who do you see? Is it Ebenezer Scrooge? Is it some rich politician or Wall Street banker? Is it your next door neighbor? Is it you?

Greed is a human epidemic. The poor want what the rich have and the rich want more of what they have. In today’s text, Jesus issues a warning to someone fighting over an inheritance. That warning is for all people: *Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions* (Lk 12:15 ESV).

In this one sentence, Jesus rejects much of what keeps our society, and our economy, humming along. Jesus warns against greed. But what is greed and can it infect anyone? Greed, in varying degrees, exists in all people because all people are sinful. The dictionary defines greed as: *the desire to possess more than one needs, more than one can use, or more than one already possesses.*

Greed is a very popular sin, however, we often choose not to recognize it or talk about it. By not talking about greed, we can lull ourselves into thinking we don’t have to deal with it. Recovery groups talk about something similar when they speak about a person’s alcoholism. For the alcoholic’s family, the disease can be the elephant in the room. Everyone knows the problem exists because it dominates the entire family’s life, but no one talks about it. So, since the problem is not discussed, everyone simply refuses to see the elephant.

For our culture, greed is the elephant in the room. Being greedy has a very negative connotation so we sometimes refuse to recognize its presence. However, to see greed in action we need only go to the nearest shopping mall.

Greed is the desire to possess something for the sake of possessing it, not for any enjoyment it brings or any purpose it serves. It’s the sin of simply piling up things, whether we store them away in bigger barns like the rich fool in today’s parable, or in houses so large they dwarf the people who live in them.

Greed is a sin our culture encourages, and is absolutely shameless in doing so. Billboards, television advertising, newspapers all scream a constant siren's song of get more, buy more, have more.

The advertising industry doesn't see people as rational human beings, or children of God, or citizens of the republic. It views all people as nothing more than consumers that can be manipulated into acquiring more and more goods. I once saw a bumper sticker that summed up that philosophy in just three words: **Born to Shop**.

If you make a trip to the local mall, you will find yourself standing on the holy ground of the Temple of Greed. And much of the stuff sold there nobody needs. Yet, the entire ambiance is cleverly arranged to seduce you into buy something, to acquire something, whether you need it or not.

Yet, it's not the merchandise that's in the forefront of many people's mall experience. The real draw is adding one more thing to your collection of things. What started out as a shopping trip to buy something you need, often turns into a quest to fill some empty space inside of you.

For all the promises made about being fulfilled, whether those promises are overt or covert, we soon become hungry again and return to the source; a source which cannot satisfy, a deity that doesn't keep its promises.

We do gain something from greed and it's not the stuff that comes with price tags. Greed brings us two emotions, two experiences. One of this is dissatisfaction. The other is distraction.

Greed promises to satisfy us and it does, but only for a moment. Buying for the sake of buying can be satisfying, but the luster seems to fade when we bring our newest possession home and we see it without the flattering lights of the display room floor. The thrill doesn't last as long as the listing on our credit card statement.

As a kid, I learned more than I ever wanted to know about poison ivy. The key to poison ivy is not to touch it. However, once you have it, the key becomes not to scratch. It's hard not to scratch, because the itch is almost unbearable. But scratching can lead to things far worse than poison ivy.

Greed works in much the same way. Once we are infected with greed, we want to scratch, we want to acquire, even though we know we shouldn't. Possessing more and more promises to bring relief, but, in reality, it make the problem worse. We itch, we scratch. We feel empty, we buy.

I once saw the results of a survey asking how people viewed their financial condition. The survey found a considerable portion of those interviewed agreed with the following two statements: 1) I cannot afford to buy everything I really need; and 2) I spend all of my money on the basic necessities of life.

You might expect a large percentage of those on the lower end of the income scale to agree with these statements, and about 2/3 of the people with an income of less than \$10,000 a year did agree.

What's surprising is that over 1/3 of the people with an income over \$75,000 a year also agreed with these statements. Having a higher income doesn't guarantee you regard your income as adequate. You still itch, you still want to scratch.

The other experience that results from greed is distraction. Having for the sake of having distracts us from relationships. We want to hoard rather than share, so our relationships with other people suffer. Greed emphasizes having and keeping, and that makes us always on the lookout for someone who might want what we have.

We are also distracted from our relationship with God. When we are controlled by greed, we cannot be grateful to God for all the blessings he has given us. Instead of being thankful for what we have, our hearts are desperate for more than we have.

Greed also gives us a perverted view of Creation. The welfare of our environment takes a backseat to our wants and desires. We start to view all of Creation as nothing more than material for our consumption.

Unfortunately, the person consumed with greed ends up disconnected from Creation, from God, and from other people. A constant hunger for abundance leaves a person desperately poor in all the ways that truly matter.

Having looked at the negative, let's examine how to fight off the need for greed. Today's Gospel text offers two suggestions.

First, the parable of the rich fool reminds us that death brings an end even to the most successful attempts to have the biggest, the most, and the best. You may have it, but you can't take it with you. At the end of the game both the king and the pawn go in the same box. If we spend our existence on accumulation of things, we miss our on a meaningful life.

Second, the last words of the Gospel give us an alternative to worldly greed. Rather than simply storing up treasures for their own sake, we can be rich in the things of God. Jesus calls us to look beyond the lust for things and to see things as they truly are.

We can recognize God's generosity, which continues regardless of what we do or fail to do; generosity that places no weight on our education level, our vocational success, our skin color, our zip code, or our national origin. We can live trusting God to provide all that we need.

We can stop seeing other people as rivals, or obstacles to the satisfaction of our private desires. Instead, we can see them as sisters and brothers who share this world with us and enrich our lives by their existence.

We can see nature as belonging to God and entrusted to our care. We can begin to see that nature has integrity, purpose, and dignity beyond the satisfaction of our desires. It deserves our admiration and respect.

Rather than living in dissatisfaction, we can live with a new sense of wonder about everything. Rather than being distracted from our relationships, we can enjoy them. Rather than hoarding possessions to add to our own petty little kingdom, we can recognize the beautiful kingdom of God that is ours to enjoy now in part and in eternity in completeness.

Prayer, worship, Bible study, service, witness, and giving all help to free us from human greed and enable us to live as the joyful, complete children of God we were always intended to be. When viewed through "God-colored" glasses, we can see that greed is not only a sin, its also irrelevant. There is nothing we need beyond the riches of God's grace and love.