

## **“Confronting Our Struggle with Greed”**

**Luke 12:13-21**

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I learned a valuable lesson years ago about the interconnectedness of people. I was preaching on today’s reading from Luke 12 in Richmond and I began with a story about some beautiful family homes in another setting where I had served that were rotting to the ground because the heirs were fighting over how much of the inheritance each of them would get, somewhat like the man who comes to Jesus, asking him to tell his brother to divide his family inheritance with him.

After the service, one of our members there approached me and said that her mother was from that community and that her mother and her siblings had been part of one of the families fighting over their inheritance while the family home deteriorated. She was not offended by my story. In fact, she agreed with my assessment. It just put me on notice to be careful in the telling of such stories.

But we all need to be on notice because we are all interconnected in churches like ours, we all tell stories, and the stories we tell may be connected to others. But the added truth is we are all connected to the underlying issue in this story about Jesus and the parable he tells about a rich man who has a bumper crop.

We may or may not fight over an inheritance, we may or may not acquire so much that we have to build a bigger barn or house to store all of our possessions, but we all struggle with greed in some way. It is one of the most ubiquitous and troublesome forces in our time. It is one of the evils scripture warns us against most often, as in just today’s readings Jesus tells us to be on guard against it and the Apostle Paul tells the Colossians to put it to death. But it is a difficult demon to confront.

One reason we struggle with greed is that we live in a culture which encourages us to acquire more and more in every way possible, whether we need more or not. In fact, our economy depends upon our

passionate pursuit of possessions. When I co-owned an athletic store in Louisville years ago, I wanted people to buy more and more shoes and athletic clothing. It's one of the downsides of capitalism. I am not advocating a different economic system. All systems have pros and cons. We just need to be careful not to assume an unqualified biblical blessing on our system. No economic system is beyond critique.

The late comedian George Carlin had a routine about our obsession with things that included these words (referenced by Cynthia Briggs Kittredge in *The Christian Century*, July 17, 2019, p. 21).

You got your stuff with you? I'll bet you do. Guys have stuff in their pockets; women have stuff in their purses... Stuff is important. You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a *place* for your stuff. That's what life is about, tryin' to find a place for your stuff! If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down and see all the little piles of stuff. Everybody's got his own little pile of stuff.

It is one of very few George Carlin routines I can quote here, but it is a light and insightful way of describing reality. Like the rich man in Jesus' parable, we are programmed in this culture to acquire more and more, and when we do, to find bigger spaces in which to store it all.

But it's not just that we are encouraged to acquire in every way; we are taught to measure our worth by that acquisition. Jesus says that one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions, but our culture tells us something different. Every advertisement we see, every message we hear, almost every conversation we have tells us that the most accomplished people drive the better cars, wear the better clothes, drink the more-trendy beverages, live in the finest homes (multiple, of course!). And it's not just that we are tempted to view others through the lens of wealth; it's that we feel better or worse about ourselves in relationship to where we are in the never-ending journey of acquisition.

As people of faith, of course, we deny this. We know we can't take it with us. All is vanity, says the author of Ecclesiastes, we have to leave our stuff to those who come after us, and who knows if they will be wise or foolish? It's what's in our hearts and souls that matters. But underneath the thin veneer of piety lies the practical soul of capitalism. Money isn't everything, but we don't want our children growing up to be or growing up to marry a teacher or social worker, a minister or musician. They won't make enough to live, like we want them to... We're only thinking in practical terms.... But in truth we're parroting the values of our culture which directly contradict the values of our faith.

Yet, what all of this demonstrates is that we struggle with greed not just because of the influences of our culture but because of our willingness to compromise and our ability to make excuses. Making money is not a bad thing, in and of itself. In fact, we can use money to accomplish a great deal of good and extend the realm of God. Scripture says that *the love of money* is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10), not money itself. And planning for the future is not bad either. It is wise to prepare financially and in other ways.

The trouble is we never seem to have enough to make us feel comfortable about the future. Do we? People raised during the Great Depression get a little grace here, but what about the rest of us? No matter how much we have, we always need a little more, just in case. And we can rationalize until the cows, pigs, and goats come home. But there is no way to plan for every possible scenario or need.

And so, at some point, we have to wonder if we will ever have enough, and even more importantly, what our obsession with securing the future says about our trust in God. There is a phrase in the Lord's Prayer we share each week that describes the kind of faith Jesus desires for us - give us this day our daily bread. Have we ever thought about what this means? It harkens back to the time in the wilderness when God provided bread, manna from heaven, on a daily basis. It is a petition for today's needs, assuming that we need not ask for more than today because we can trust God for tomorrow. We can trust God one day at a time. And we do... so long as we can cover things ourselves!

I don't think Jesus is calling for a lack of responsibility in the Lord's Prayer or in today's reading, but there are limits on how much we need, there is a place for trust, and not all cultures function like ours.

In his book *Simplicity: the Art of Living* Franciscan Richard Rohr tells a story which illustrates this reality. He was preaching in the cathedral in Nairobi, and after he finished, they shared in a time of prayer. One of the older Kenyan men prayed, "Lord, never let us move back into stone houses." Rohr says he nodded and said, "Yes, Lord," though he had no idea what the prayer meant.

Later he asked the local priest what the old man was talking about and he said, "You know Africa, you've seen our country. People here live in little huts, and huts have no doors. That's why your family is my family, and my family is your family. But as soon as you move into a stone house, you build a door. And on the door you put a lock. And behind this door you begin to collect your belongings, and then you have to spend the rest of your life defending those belongings."

Not all cultures share our perspective on the blessings of material abundance. There are other ways to live. Despite all of our excuses, greed is not a necessity. I'm not suggesting that we move into huts, but the more we possess, the more our possessions possess us, and the more we are distanced from each other. There is an old saying, attributed to various sources, that we use people and love things when we ought to use things and love people. Greed leads to this distortion of values and it grows out of cultural influences and our ability to make excuses.

But according to Jesus, there is at least one other source of our struggle with greed, perhaps the most significant source. After he tells the parable about a rich man building bigger barns and then being told he has been a fool to focus on possessions because his life will be required of him that very night, Jesus says this, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

This seems to be the real issue – where we put our ultimate loyalty. In fact, Paul tells the Colossians that greed is a kind of idolatry, it is putting things before God. But we need to be careful not to dismiss the concern with excessive accumulation.

The quick move which paves the way for rationalization is to say that there is nothing wrong with wealth as long as we are close to God. And there is a measure of truth in this interpretation. Jesus is saying that priorities matter and God must come first. If God does, then God can direct how we use any aspect of our lives, including financial resources.

The trouble is – how do we know that we are rich toward God? And how do we know that we are using our resources as God desires? It is easy to make a passing glance at faith, do as we please, and then think we are covered. It is easy to hold on to a massive amount more than any number of people could need in a lifetime and rationalize away any concerns over greed. It is easy to make excuses for why a smaller and smaller percentage of people have control over a greater and greater percentage of the world's wealth, to remember only half of the verse Jesus quotes about the poor being with us always (Deuteronomy 15:11), and thus make peace with economic disparities and abject suffering.

Greed is a devious force as former Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan finally acknowledged after the financial crisis of 2008. Many things had been accounted for in our financial system but not one significant factor, at least not adequately – the human condition, the reality of sin, greed. We had to learn a lesson the hard way as a nation, and the sad truth is we have forgotten that lesson already!

So, rather than move quickly to convenient rationalization, we are better served to use care - say that our first priority is to cultivate our relationship with God and allow this relationship to shape everything else; but because greed is a tricky temptation, keep an eye on our yearning to accumulate. Wealth is not the enemy of faith, but as Jesus has said, we cannot serve God and wealth (Matthew 6:24). One of the two will come first, and any time we seem to be hoarding more and more for ourselves, we are at risk of losing focus and shifting priorities.

In fact, quite often an obsession with accumulation indicates more than a shift in priorities. It betrays a desire to fill a void. Sometimes the void has to do with human relationships, something we are missing. We buy things in an effort to fill the emptiness, but it never works. Other times the void has to do with spiritual things, our relationship with God. When this is the case, we try to fill the void with all sorts of things

ranging from food and drink to pleasure and possessions – but as St. Augustine once said, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. If we are not rich toward God, nothing else will fill the void.

And so, in the end, cultivating our relationship with God is the key to confronting this struggle. Being at peace with God helps us to be at peace with ourselves and our neighbor, and it keeps us in touch with what gives meaning and joy to life. It's about people, not things. It's about relationships, not wealth. It's about what we do for others, not what we keep for ourselves.

I knew a man who made a lot of money but refused to spend hardly any of it, even on things that meant something to his wife, like an electric garage door when she weakened physically. Then, he was diagnosed with a terminal illness and given little time. He rethought his priorities and started giving more to others, including his wife.

Wealth doesn't guarantee emptiness any more than poverty guarantees fulfillment, but there is no amount of wealth that can make us happy or fill us with meaning. Only God and a life lived according to God's design can do that.

The summer after Ali graduated from High School, she went to Italy and Greece with other Broughton students on a trip led by her history teacher. As a part of that trip, she visited the hometown of the ancient Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras and bought for me this Cup of Pythagoras. It demonstrates the way greed works. There are holes in the bottom of the cup, but you can fill it with liquid up to a marked line and it will hold the liquid. You can drink from it as from any other cup. But if you cross the line and put too much in, all of the liquid rushes out the bottom, emptying the cup.

I needed our resident N.C. State physics professor, Divine Kumah, to explain to me how the cup works, but the message about greed is obvious. When we have more than we need, we may lose all that we have, not just the excess, because when life gets out of balance, everything can fall apart, nothing is guaranteed. Take care, be on guard against all kinds of greed, Jesus says, for one's life does not consist of an abundance of possessions. What will it take for us to believe him?