

**“Focusing on Just One of Many Moral Concerns - Greed”**  
**Colossians 3:1–11; Luke 12:13–21**  
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**August 3, 2025**

I remember a question that was included in an exam in seminary. It read as follows. “Name the seven deadly sins. Define each and illustrate how you have integrated it into your life. Be specific.” It was obviously tongue-in-cheek, designed to get students to laugh and relax, but the truth is many people, including many in public life today, could answer this question in a serious way. They could check the box for all seven deadly sins or any other list of sins.

Consider the list the author of Colossians names in our reading – fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed; anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, lying. Most of us find ourselves somewhere in this list, but we know of people who can check every box, and in today’s world of moral relativity, this doesn’t seem to disqualify a person from leadership in any form.

David Brooks wrote a fascinating article on July 8 wherein he addressed the loss in moral capacity we have experienced. He presented two theories for when this shift took place, one dating back about sixty years, the other going further back to the eighteenth century, as a byproduct of the Enlightenment, the rise of individual freedom, led to a diminished concern for community responsibility.

But no matter where we see this trend as having started, it seems pretty clear that we have lost our capacity for moral discernment. The world has become more complex, or at least our understanding of it has, and freedom for individual thoughts is a good thing, but to lose all sense of right and wrong, what is true and what is not, in addition to any hint of kindness and compassion, is not good, especially for Christians.

The author of Colossians says that those who are raised with Christ set their minds on the things that are above and thus have a moral compass; some things are right, and some are wrong. In other words, how we live matters. Christian faith isn’t just about what we believe.

Those who have died with Christ in baptism and been raised to walk in newness of life are actually called to *walk in newness of life*, seeking good and avoiding evil.

Lest there be any uncertainty about what he is talking about, the author lists the series of “earthly things” we have named and urges us to put to them to death — fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed; anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, lying. It is a lot to consider in one sermon, but in the reading from Luke, Jesus focuses on one thing named in Colossians — greed. It is one of the most central evils, and thus perhaps it is enough to focus on it today, as long as we remember that there is a larger concern for our moral capacity.

The story begins with a man in a crowd asking Jesus to help him resolve a dispute with his brother over his inheritance. According to Judaic inheritance practices, an older brother would receive two-thirds of the estate while the younger would receive one-third (Deuteronomy 21:16-17). The man, probably the younger brother, asks Jesus to tell his brother to divide the inheritance. It may be that the older brother is trying to take it all, which would be unjust, but we don’t know. All we know is that there is a dispute, and the man wants Jesus to resolve it.

This may be an ancient story, two thousand years old, to be precise, but it sounds very familiar. I can’t tell you how many inheritance disputes I have been made aware of, some in every setting where I have served. In one setting, heirs let family property rot to the ground rather than allow other heirs to get what they thought should be theirs. As a result, no one got anything!

In another setting, wealthy family members who had nothing to do with a loved one for decades did everything they could to grab all he left and leave out a family member who had cared for the deceased. If there is a literal hell with levels of punishment, as in Dante’s imagery, I have a feeling I know who is going to be there! Some people think death brings families together... well, not always. Old hostilities do not magically go away because we are grieving, and greed is a powerful force!

We are familiar with this kind of dispute, we understand why the man wants Jesus’ help, but Jesus says, “Not my problem, not in my job

description, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” Every minister I know would love to lean on Jesus here at some point... we are asked to do many things that aren’t really in our wheelhouse... but we need to remember that Jesus only lasted three years...

Jesus refuses to weigh in on the inheritance dispute, but he uses the question to address the broader concern of greed. “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;” he says, “for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

This might sound like a rebuke of the man, but Jesus is addressing the crowd now, not just the man. And he is telling them that greed is destructive to others and self. Material wealth is not a measure of ultimate value. At the end of the day, we can’t take it with us, though there are people who try, like the Pharaohs.

To underscore his point, Jesus tells a story, as he often does, this one about a rich man who has a bumper crop and thus decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. While he waits, realizing he has it made, he decides to relax — eat, drink, and be merry. It is as if he has won the lottery or simply had a great return on his investments. But just as he prepares for a life of ease, God says to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you’ve prepared, whose will they be?” It is a gut punch of an ending.

We may wonder what is so wrong about building bigger barns. The man has to do something with the crop. In the Genesis narrative, Joseph counsels Pharaoh to store up food grown in years of bounty so that he will be prepared for the years of famine that are coming (Genesis 41:17-36). The problem is not with the storage of the crop but with the man’s attitude about it. The problem is not that he has had a windfall but what he plans to do with it. The problem is not with material gain but with excessive wealth and presumption.

In ancient Jewish thought, life is a gift from God and thus any material blessing comes from God and thus there are two obligations — to give thanks to God and to consider sharing something with one’s neighbor in need (Deuteronomy 15:11). The man in Jesus’ story thinks only of himself, not of God or his neighbor. The windfall is his, he deserves it, and he will enjoy it... but not for long, as it turns out, not for

long. “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves,” Jesus says, “but are not rich toward God.”

Taking a step back and looking at this story in light of our experience, there are several issues of concern. First, there is too much self-interest in the man’s response to abundance, and this is not simply a moral problem, it is a practical one because pursuing self-interest alone never leads to fulfillment. I know, it sounds like a preacherly thing to say, but this doesn’t make it wrong. And it’s not just a preacherly thing, it’s a Jesus thing. Those who lose their lives will save them, he says.

It’s just part of how we are made. We find our greatest purpose and joy in service to others. It’s fine to pursue personal goals, but if we seek only to benefit ourselves, we will never be content. When we have suffered loss or disappointment, we need time to ourselves to heal, but our healing will never be complete if we only look at ourselves. It is when we get out of ourselves and start doing things for others that we find joy. As it turns out, even when it comes to money, it is more blessed to give than to receive. How might the man in Jesus’ story have fared if he had shared at least part of his new-found wealth with others?

But there is another issue with man’s response, the nature of greed, the insatiable desire for more. Once we start down the path of accumulation, we can never have enough. I remember a story Murphy Osborne told about someone visiting an extremely wealthy man who owned many homes and a yacht. Seeing it all, the person told the wealthy man, “I have something you will never have?” Incredulous, the wealthy man said, “What is that?” “Enough,” said the other, “Enough.”

How many billions do the billionaires of our time need to be satisfied? For many of them, there is no answer. Some have a moral compass, some have compassion for others, a measure of humility and gratitude, but many do not. They continue to take and keep all they can, no matter who suffers, and it will never be enough, and not just because they can always think of more ways to spend money.

The last thing Jesus says in our reading gives us a clue as to why the wealthy can never have enough, and this points us toward the final and most significant issue of concern. “So it is with those who store up

treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” Material things alone can never satisfy us. It’s just how we are made. We are restless until we find our rest in God and God’s ways.

This is what it means to be rich toward God. It is to realize that we are more than acquirers of stuff and partakers of amusement. We are spiritual beings made for a purpose — to love God and neighbor — and until we realize this, until we do this, we will not be satisfied. All the junk food in the world will never fill our need for a healthy and balanced diet, no matter what the Snickers commercials may claim, though I do like Snickers... All the wealth on the planet, all the things we can acquire, will not feed our souls.

To be clear, poverty won’t either, and wealth can be used for good, but Augustine was right when he said our problem is often that we love things and use people when we ought to love people and use things. In The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. What or who do we treasure most?

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 a 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, whatever you want to put in it. You can drink from it as from any other cup, but if you cross the line and put too much in, all the liquid rushes out the bottom, emptying the cup.

I needed 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 that’s where excessive self-interest leads, that’s what greed produces, we can never have enough because what we seek is not what we need. “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God,” says Jesus. It is not a word of chastisement. It is an invitation to a better life, if we will accept it.