

Watch Out for Greed!

Luke 12:13-21

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Tom Ross, who is currently the president of Davidson College, served as a superior court judge for 17 years. Being a judge was a “job [that] called for the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon. In one case over which he presided, two brothers were fighting bitterly over their late father’s estate. Most assets had been resolved, but neither would give up claim to a particular clock, and refused to settle the suit because of that one item. [Both sons] claimed the clock was valuable, and the whole lawsuit was left hanging on that one item...

“Rather than impose a judgment, Ross found a way for both brothers to win. He told them the clock would be subject to a silent auction between them. Whoever bid lowest got the clock, and the high bidder got the money that the other brother bid. ‘When the bids were revealed, it turned out the clock was not nearly so valuable,’ Ross [remarked.]”¹

It would appear that after more than two thousand years, things haven’t changed much, have they? “Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me’”²

What Jesus says about our wealth and what the world says about our wealth are usually very, very different messages. Jesus warned us to be on guard against all kinds of greed, and that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. But the moment you walk out those doors, you will start to hear the message that the one with the most, wins.

This morning you hear Jesus pronouncing judgment on those who store up things for themselves while failing to be rich toward God. Out there, you will be told that you’d better look out for yourself, because nobody else will.

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“Watch out!,” says Jesus, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”³ It is a stern warning that Jesus issues. And he issues the warning not to the young man who comes up to him, but to all the onlookers, and as readers of today’s text that would include you and me.

Watch out! In the original Greek text, it is a present tense imperative. That means that the command carries with it a sense of continuous action, as in “continually watch out for all kinds of greed,” or “always be on guard against all kinds of greed.”

Greed is pernicious and insatiable. With greed the focus is either on oneself or one’s possessions. Theologically, greed is simply a synonym for coveting, and if you know the ten commandments, then you know what God says about coveting. One of the reasons that God commanded against coveting is that it destroys community, because the coveter, the greedy one, is only looking out for himself or herself, not for others.

One word that you won't find in the vocabulary of a person for whom greed is a driving force, is "enough." I've seen a boat docked at the marina, and its name is "Never Enough."

Greed means never having to say "enough." For the past two months a few of us have gathered for Sunday school to talk about living simply. Letting the word "enough" be a governing word in our decision-making is a key to simple living. Through our discussions we commiserated with each other as to how difficult it really is in today's world to make the word, "enough," truly operative in our lives.

Someone asked John D. Rockefeller, "How much wealth does it take to satisfy a person?" His reply: "Just a little bit more." The Romans had a proverb: "Money is like sea water; the more you drink, the thirstier you become."⁴

"Watch out," said Jesus, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed."

Jesus then says, "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."⁵ And to make his point, Jesus tells a parable. It is a parable about a man who is consumed with himself and his possessions. He has more than he knows what to do with, so like any prudent person, he decides that the best thing to do is to build a bigger, better barn to store his crops. His ultimate goal is to be able to lay back and enjoy the easy life – to eat, drink, and be merry.

Only, that's not the way the parable ends, is it? God says to the man, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"⁶

Jesus isn't attacking the notion of saving for a rainy day. Good stewardship would affirm the prudence of setting some of our income aside in times of plenty to prepare for the possibility of future scarcity. In many ways, the severity of the recession our nation has experienced for the past two years could have been tempered to some degree if we were a nation of savers, and not spenders and debtors. In the book of Genesis, on the basis of a vision from God, Joseph urges the pharaoh to stockpile grain in warehouses during seven years of plenty, in order to prepare for seven years of famine. So I really don't think that the notion of saving is what Jesus is criticizing in his parable.

Nor is Jesus necessarily attacking wealth itself. You see, ultimately it's not the size of the barns that causes God to take the man's life in the parable. It's the *reason* that the barn is so big and so full that brings judgment upon the man.

Going back to the story of Joseph—Joseph built big barns, and he loaded them to full capacity. But the difference between the big barns that Joseph built, and the big barn that the man in the parable built, lies in the purpose of the barns. Joseph's barns were built for the common good, for the care of the people, to be able to distribute food to the needy in the time of famine.

The man's barns were built for himself, for the care and provision of himself. And therein lies the reason for the not-so-happy ending of the parable: The man was rich toward himself, but that was it. He had no regard for the fact that God was behind the abundance he was enjoying in the first place. Neither did he apparently have any regard for others who may not have fared so well. His whole focus is on himself. The man was condemned, not because he stored up riches, but because he stored up riches *only for himself*.

The truth is, a life not lived toward God or toward others is no life at all. The whole Old Testament could be condensed with the two commands to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself—and the man failed in both ways. He was rich and generous toward himself, with no regard for others, and certainly no regard for God. That is his folly.

Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.

Some will say that it was the greed of Wall Street that caused the recession we are in right now. But, really, I think the greed of Wall Street is only an indication of the greed that is so tightly woven into the fabric of our culture. Greed is in our blood. One of the very first words a baby will learn is, "More." Ours is an economy that depends on accumulation of goods, and so the only way to perpetuate it is to encourage an attitude that seeks more, more, more. The message you get through entertainment, and through marketing, and even through our elected officials, is that our security and meaning is directly tied to how much wealth and how many goods we are able to accumulate for ourselves.

And so we try to fill our barns. Only, nowadays we don't even fill the barns like the man in the parable, who happened to enjoy an excellent crop. Nowadays we fill our barns through debt. I'm not talking about mortgage debt, though even that has gotten out of hand in recent years. I'm really talking about consumer debt—credit cards, in particular. There's a national radio talk show host named Dave Ramsey, whose sole purpose is to promote debt-free living. I haven't been able to get the show on the radio around here, but when I was in Texas, I would listen most every day. And what astounded me was the number of people—primarily my age and younger—who would call in and would be upside-down on their car loans, and who would have credit-card debts in excess of \$20,000. These were people of modest means, often earning less than \$30,000 per year. There was no way they could keep up with the payments, and pay their rent or mortgage, and pay their utilities. They had built big barns for themselves, but they had filled them with borrowed goods. And it was time to pay the piper.

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Not only does greed put us in a hole so deep that we can't get out, but greed also makes us blind to the source and purpose of our blessings in the first place. Greed makes us so focused inward on ourselves that we fail to recognize that God is the one who blesses us with abundance in the first place. Greed makes us blind to the fact that all that we have comes from the gracious and providential hand of God. And greed also prevents us from seeing that life—true, abundant, everlasting life—comes, not when we accumulate for ourselves, but when we see the blessings we have received from God as a means by which we can live in gratitude toward God and with concern for others.

It is not the riches we accumulate that Jesus denounces. It is the failure to use our riches to be generous and grateful toward God and others.

Some may think that such a parable as the one Jesus told in this morning's lesson is not truly necessary in our current economy, because most people are facing the reality of empty barns, not barns that are overflowing and bursting with abundance. But the heart of the matter applies equally in times of plenty or in want, because it is a reminder that the meaning of life is not found in the abundance of possessions at all; rather, meaning is found in a life that is lived gratefully and generously toward God.

Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.

Greed will kill you.

At the very least, it will prevent you from living, really living.

Let us pray.

Help us, O God. Help us to remember whence our blessings come. And in remembering, help us not simply to store up for ourselves, but instead to live gratefully and generously for you, loving you with all our being, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

¹ “Presidential Biography,” on the Davidson College website, <http://www3.davidson.edu/cms/x23405.xml?ss=print>

² Luke 12:13

³ Luke 12:15a

⁴ Taken from a weekly e-mail of sermon illustrations I receive. The website where one can subscribe to the illustrations is www.esermons.com

⁵ Luke 12:15b, NRSV

⁶ Luke 12:20