

Be On Guard Against Greed

“Watch out! Be on guard against all kinds of greed.” Luke 12:15

Luke 12:13-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Have you ever come down with a severe case of *pleonexia*? I have from time to time. It's often very hard to cure. It kind of fits into the category of an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, in that it's better to try to avoid the problem in the first place, rather than trying to fix it once it hits.

Oh, by the way you may be wondering, what is *pleonexia*? *Pleonexia* is the Greek word, used in this morning's Gospel reading from **Luke 12:15**, which is translated into English as “greed.” Jesus gives a stern warning to the crowd, **“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”** This message is perhaps even more relevant for us in this day and age, dominated by a culture of consumerism, than it was for those living in a predominately peasant agricultural society 2000 years ago in ancient Palestine. But evidently it was a problem then, as well.

By saying that our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions, Jesus is telling us that **ultimately our lives are defined not by what we have, but rather by who we are.** But try getting that message across to a child who wants just the right toy (or in this day in age it's probably an iPad), or a young person who is under enormous peer pressure to wear just the right name-brand tennis shoes or clothes, or to adults who feel pressured to drive just the right car, or live in just the right house in just the right neighborhood. Or something I used to be particularly prone to, having the very latest and best electronic equipment.

The warning to beware of all kinds of greed begs the question that each of us must constantly ask of ourselves: **How much is enough? The problem usually arises when we confuse the things we need with the things we want in order to live a fulfilling life.** That especially applies when we go deeper into debt trying to get those things we want. And though most of us probably don't have a lot of money left over at the end of the month, let's face it, we're all rich in comparison with the economic standards of most of the rest of world's population.

Let me pause here for a moment and stress that there is a **big difference between being wealthy and being greedy.** So, what is greed? Most simply, it is defined as **the desire to acquire or possess more than we need.** Greed seeks possessions, to get our hands on whatever we can, to acquire without reference to our own specific needs, or the situation and needs of others. Greed also has a strong connection to the word “covet” which is one of the warnings in the Ten Commandments about desiring what other people have. The ancient Romans even had a proverb that said money is like sea-water; the more persons drink the thirstier they become.

New Testament commentator William Barclay describes pleonexia as an **'accursed love of having,'** which 'will pursue its own interests with complete disregard for the rights of others, and even for the considerations of common humanity.' Again, the basis for the warning against greed is the assertion that true, authentic living is not to be found in and through our possessions, but rather in how we live our lives in relationship to God and to others. **The Apostle Paul goes as far as to label greed a form of idolatry when we substitute our search for the Divine with the search for wealth and possessions, and in doing so ignore God in the process.**

"True wealth," writes one biblical commentator, "is only accumulated when one has God in mind in the use of one's economic means." That applies to every one of us, no matter how rich or how poor. That is the point made in the parable Jesus tells about a rich man who is called a "fool" for storing up treasures just for himself, while not being concerned about being "rich toward God."

With this parable, Jesus provides an object lesson of how *not* to live as a disciple, as a follower of the ways of Jesus. It is very important to note, however, that the parable does not criticize the accumulation of wealth in and of itself. What is criticized is selfishness and not becoming rich in spiritual matters. Also, spending our life living only for tomorrow instead of living today in the here and now.

This parable, therefore, is not an outright condemnation or judgment against those who have money and wealth. The gospel writer Luke, on the other hand, may have had a bit of his own agenda going on in his reporting of this parable. From his theological perspective, riches (as in having wealth, possessions, and elite economic status) are *not* neutral. **For Luke, riches are inherently negative. Why? Because in ancient Palestine, people became rich primarily by exploiting the poor.**

From Luke's perspective, therefore, there is a life-threatening nature to riches. For it was a zero-sum game. A person became rich only when others became poor. There is indeed an element of this fact that continues to this day. It was even the foundation of one candidate who recently dropped out of the race for president.

With that in mind, let's take a closer look at the parable itself. We learn that the farmer's barns aren't big enough to contain all the grain of this bountiful year's bumper crop. That, in and of itself, would have been interpreted as a blessing from God. So as a wise business manager he upgrades his storage facilities so that all his harvest can be maintained efficiently. When the work is done, he will be in a position to relax and enjoy his good fortune.

Nothing wrong with that, is there? Don't we all try to save for a rainy day, or for retirement? All the farmer's responsibilities in life will have now been met, and all the needs of his life will now be satisfied - or so he thinks. The twist in the parable comes when God informs the farmer that he will die that very night. After spending a lifetime trying to secure his financial future, he only has a few hours left of his life to enjoy it - to eat, drink, and be merry. **Surveys reveal that one of the greatest regrets of dying persons is that they worked too hard, and that they didn't spend enough time simply enjoying life.** That's why our Old Testament reading for today from the Book of Ecclesiastes calls all these pursuits "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Ecc. 1:1), and compares it to the impossible task of "chasing after the wind" (v. 14).

Remember, however, the farmer is not being criticized or condemned for accumulating wealth and securing his financial security. Rather, **he becomes an example of foolish living by neglecting to also focus his attention on spiritual matters and the ways of God.** For without an eye toward godly things, the farmer's craving to

keep all his good fortune *only* for his own personal enjoyment is, in fact, an act of total disregard for the needs of others.

The farmer hasn't done anything illegal, he hasn't stolen from his neighbors or mistreated his workers. However, the parable declares that he is a "fool" for living completely in and for himself. **He is greedy – he suffers from pleonexia – in that he is selfish and self-absorbed. Being a "rich fool," therefore, does not automatically apply to all people who are materially wealthy, but for those who do not think about God and how God would have us use our resources with an eye towards others.**

So in the context of the gospel of Luke and as a community of faith, that means we are to share our blessings and good fortunes with others. All of this is another way of saying how important it is that **living a life of faith involves the good and faithful stewardship of all of our resources.** Yet how many of us, in the society we live in today, including myself, simply use our increased wealth to upgrade and buy more stuff, rather than to give more and more away, including to those in need, and to organizations that seek to help others?

Admittedly, today's message may not be the one that you, nor I, want to hear. It's one of those that make looking in the mirror a bit painful. But perhaps we need to heed the warning to be on guard against all kinds of greed, to be reminded that **wealth does not really and ultimately secure the future, and that living a truly fulfilling life is a gift of God and not a hard-earned acquisition.** So I'll leave you with the following questions to ponder and reflect upon:

- What do your possessions really mean to you?
- Which ones fulfill your *wants*, rather than your *needs*?
- How much is "enough"?
- Do you get trapped from time to time in the preoccupation and temptation of accumulating possessions?
- How do you deal with the dilemma of abundance in having wealth *without* greed?
- How does the reality of our own mortality play into how we invest our wealth, as well as how we invest our time?
- How do you keep God, and other people, in mind in the use of your financial resources and stewardship?

Let us all be on guard, then, as we strive for a cure for *pleonexia*, and focus on what it means to be "**rich toward God.**"

Amen.

Resources:
Feasting on the Word, Lectionary Commentary
 Wikipedia