

Release Us from Pleonexia

“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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Pandemics are taking a real toll on us, especially as individuals and families, as well as a nation and world. We're all way too familiar with, or have either suffered from or might be soon infected with COVID-19. There's another pandemic, however, of which many, if not most of us, are either highly susceptible or are already suffering. I'm talking about **the pandemic of pleonexia**. While it may come and go, it's probably not completely curable.

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 is also addressed by the author of the New Testament epistle of Colossians, which implores, **“Put to death...greed (which is idolatry)”** (Col.4:5). Greed is 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.

This warning is perhaps even more relevant for us in our day and age, dominated by a culture of consumerism and materialism, 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 – especially for the rich. 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 (which in this day in age is probably an iPad), or a young person who is under enormous peer pressure to wear just the right name-brand sneakers 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 constantly needing to upgrade to buy very latest and best electronic equipment. It's the “keeping up with the Jones'” syndrome.

If you watch basically any of the shows on HGTV, one of the things people get most excited about in a new or renovated house, besides the size of the kitchen, is how big the closets are. Comedian George Carlin once did a bit on how our houses are really nothing more than a place to keep all our stuff with a roof over it.

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 arises when we confuse the things we need with the stuff we want in order to live what we define as a fulling life.** This 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, we're all rich, nonetheless, in comparison with the economic standards of a vast majority 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**. Let's explore, then, the meaning of what it is to suffer from **greed**, from *pleonexia*? 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**." With that description, it's not a big leap to see this happening right now in the growing movement known as **Christian Nationalism**. This movement is obsessed with greedily gaining and exerting power and authority over others. Primarily, of course, over those who don't buy into their authoritative brand of Christianity, and yes, over those who are not white. Some have even labeled this as the **Christian Taliban**.

There is also a stream within the North American church that makes acquisition of yet more possessions our chief end, as seems to be declared by the preachers of what is known as the **prosperity gospel**. This message is based on the misguided theological claim that financial blessing and physical well-being is the will of God for them, and that faith, along with donations to their religious institution and causes, will increase one's material wealth. This, in the opinion of many, including myself, is **the very definition of greed as idolatry. For I find absolutely nothing in the ways and teachings of Jesus that would support this theological perspective**.

"True wealth," writes another 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 criticized is spending our life living only for tomorrow instead of living life to the fullest 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 because he saw it as a zero-sum game. A person in that culture and society became rich primarily when others were kept, or became poor. There is indeed an element of this, I would argue, that continues to this day. Is it not indeed true that the gap between the very poor and the very rich is widening every day?

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. Therefore, 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? Wouldn't we do the same?

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 (and there is always a twist in Jesus' parables) 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 not that they wished they had bought more stuff. Rather, it's that **they worked too hard and didn't spend enough time simply enjoying life, including with the people in their 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).

Again, 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 - suffering 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**. In the context of the gospel of Luke, and ourselves 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 faithful life of discipleship, as a follower of the ways and teachings of Jesus, involves the **good and faithful stewardship of all of our resources - time, talents, and finances**. Yet how many of us in the society we live in today, including myself, more often than not use our increased wealth to simply upgrade and buy more stuff, perhaps even to the point of needing to build bigger barns.

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**. Here, then, are some 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.”** I’ll close with three quick tips that will help:

- 1. Live more simply, freeing yourself from a preoccupation with material things.**
- 2. Enjoy the harvest, and share it with others.**
- 3. Offer and give thanks for signs of the blessed life around us.**

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word, Lectionary Commentary

Wikipedia

Kenneth H. Carter, Jr. “Off the Treadmill: Luke 12:13-21”, christiancentury.org, July 24, 2007

Stephen Farris, “Connecting the Reading with the World”, *Connections*, 2021