

“Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘**Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.**’ Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should **I do, for I have** no place to store **my crops**?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down **my** barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all **my grain and my goods**. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” **So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.**”

A man said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Dividing an inheritance can be an unpleasant situation. The ugly disputes are all too familiar: haggling over furniture, dishes, heirlooms, houses, property, land, and bank accounts left by the deceased can cause immense stress and wreck relationships. It’s critical that we all plan appropriately for the time of our own death, and leave a clear will or estate plan that we discuss with our loved ones in advance because an inheritance can explode like a bomb in a family system. I knew a woman who was widowed by her second husband and his children sued her over the estate. Many people have stories about estates or wills, and the pain and wreckage caused by greed and a lack of love, compassion or generosity. Dividing or allocating an inheritance is so fraught with emotional and relational trouble that even Jesus Christ doesn’t want to get dragged into the middle of it. When he’s asked to referee between two brothers, he refuses and responds as he so often does with a question: “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” Who can judge whose greed is right? Instead of helping the man to get his inheritance, Jesus **points the man to a different understanding of life**. A quality life is not measured in terms of wealth or possessions; a life focused on God and loving others is better than lots of money or possessions. What Jesus says in this passage goes against virtually everything our culture teaches, yet it is the consistent and clear message of the Bible.

Proverbs 15:16-17 says, “Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it. Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it.” It’s also better for your cholesterol and overall health! Those who hear the word of God and do it are truly rich.

The tenth commandment warns us against covetousness, the insatiable desire to have and to possess which leads to oppression, waste, stealing, corruption, deceit, warped priorities, and greed. (*Exodus 20:17*), “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your

neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

In today's passage from *Luke 12*, Jesus couldn't be any clearer in saying, "**Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.**" **Greed is wanting more and more, without limit or regard for others**, and it's a widespread, pervasive problem. We saw that in the news this week with just the latest example of how greedy, wealthy people will lie and cheat to get what they want; in this case their children into colleges they didn't have the qualifications to attend. The appalling parenting of these people is stunning; they were teaching their children that achievement can be bought rather than something to be worked for and earned, and the reward for diligence over time. There's a reason why greed is called idolatry in *Romans 1:25* and *Colossians 3:5*. *Ephesians 5:5*, warns us, "**Be sure of this...one who is greedy (that is, an idolater) has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.**" I wonder if we really believe that, since so many people in our culture admire and look up to people whose lives are clearly defined by greed. Greedy people are not worthy of our admiration.

When we turn our attention to the parable Jesus tells in *Luke 12*, **it makes us uncomfortable because the rich man, who seems to embody the American dream of economic success and the hope of a comfortable retirement, is called a fool by God.** He's been wildly successful financially. However, look more closely at the story. Jesus is careful to say the man wasn't responsible for his abundance. "The land of a rich man produced abundantly." Sun, soil, seed, and rain did what they naturally do and produced abundantly and made him rich. As Christians, we live with belief that God is the source of our life and any abundance we're blessed to experience. The abundance of his land or our investments is a blessing from God that demands wisdom and generosity. What lessons can we learn from the rich fool's experience so that we can live a simpler, saner, healthier, more God honoring life and not suffer his fate?

First, we can't allow ourselves to be possessed by our possessions. No matter how dominant materialism and consumerism are in the cultural sea in which we're swimming, we need to swim against the tide. Jesus tells us "**life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.**" Do our lives reflect that we believe what Jesus says is true? I often wonder if we possess our possessions or if our possessions possess us. There are many steps we can take to avoid being possessed by possessions. Don't treat shopping as a sport or a source of entertainment. Figure out the difference between truly needing something and merely wanting something. Wear clothes until they wear out or don't fit instead of buying what someone else says is "in." Avoid paying for the privilege of being a walking billboard for some corporation. When you do buy something like a shirt or a blouse, give one of the same items away to a place like Katie's Corner at the Lower Cape Outreach Council. Don't let yourself be infected with "consumptivitis" or "affluenza."

Secondly, if we want a better life, **we'll live with others in mind.** The rich fool, whether in the parable, or in real life today, lives completely for himself. In the parable the rich fool talks to

himself, he plans for himself, he congratulates himself. He is the subject of everything he says and thinks. If that sounds familiar or reminds you of anyone, you may also know a fool. Listen to how the rich fool talks about himself: “What should **I do, for I have** no place to store **my crops? I will** do this: **I will** pull down **my** barns and build larger ones, there **I will** store all **my grain and my goods**. And **I will** say to **my soul**. ‘My crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my soul...**My Goodness!**’” The fool’s greed, his possessions and wealth and his desire to accumulate more and more prevent him from seeing anyone else. Did you notice there is no one else in Jesus’ parable; there is just the man and his possessions until God speaks to him, and then it’s too late.

The parable presents a selfish, self-centered man who doesn’t think of others and their value as persons or their needs. He’s the type of person who doesn’t care where his clothes or shoes are made, or under what conditions. He doesn’t care about the age of the workers, or how little they’re paid. He doesn’t consider the impact his economic decisions have on other people near or far or in the future. All he cares about is providing for himself and his own happiness. The greedy fool embodies a way of thinking that believes, “I’ve earned everything I have, it’s mine to do what I want. I can make it on my own and I don’t care about anyone else, they’re not my responsibility.” “Living simply so others may simply live,” is not a cliché, but a truth that is becoming more urgent every day. A practical idea that combines a couple of spiritual disciplines is fasting from a meal once a week and donating the food or money you save to hunger relief locally or globally.

To counter greed’s corrosive influence in our lives

1. **We can’t allow ourselves to be possessed by our possessions.**
2. **We learn to live with others in mind, and**
3. **We recognize that the antidote to the poison of greed is generosity.**

The fool asks himself, “What should I do?” The problem is not really posed by the size of the harvest, but by the size of his heart; it’s his insistence on gathering and storing up everything **for himself**. The thought of giving to persons in need or to God’s work never enters his mind. Like a disease, greed has eaten away any sense of compassion he might have had. He could have gathered the excess grain and stored it in the stomachs of the hungry, the poor and the destitute. Instead he decides to tear down perfectly good barns and build bigger one, just as we sometimes see people tearing down perfectly good houses to build even larger ones. **The rich man has a full barn and an empty heart.** Have you ever said, or heard someone say, “I don’t have enough closet space. I don’t have enough storage space.”? Less frequently do we say or think, “The problem isn’t that I don’t have enough space. The problem is I have more than I need or use.”

The fourth thing we learn from this parable to counter the influence of greed is **to focus our lives on Meaning, not Possessions**. Jesus says (*Luke 9:25 NIV*), “**What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?**” The man’s view

of the future is to relax, eat, drink, and be merry. Leisure, recreation, freedom from the demands of work, the rich man's vision of the future sounds like what most Americans dream about for their retirement years. The greatest good he can imagine is a life of maximizing his own pleasure. **His view of the future is embraced by our society and called foolish by Jesus.** What gives our life meaning now and what will give it meaning when or if we're retired? What will we be remembered for at the end of our life? Ben Patterson writes in *The Grand Essentials*, "I have a theory about old age...I believe that when life has whittled us down, when joints have failed and skin has wrinkled and capillaries have clogged and hardened, what is left of us will be what we were all along, our essence. Exhibit A is a distant uncle...All his life he did nothing but find new ways to get rich...He spent his last years very comfortably, drooling and babbling constantly about the money he made. When life whittled him down to his essence, all there was left was raw greed. That is what he had cultivated in a thousand little ways over a lifetime. Exhibit B is my wife's grandmother. When she died in her mid-eighties, she had already been senile for several years. What did this lady talk about? The best example I can think of was when we asked her to pray before dinner. She would reach out and hold the hands of those sitting beside her, a broad, beatific smile would spread across her face, her dim eyes would fill with tears as she looked up to heaven, and her chin would quiver as she poured out her love for Jesus. That was Edna in a nutshell. She loved Jesus and she loved people. She couldn't remember our names, but she couldn't keep her hands from patting us lovingly whenever we got near her. When life whittled her down to her essence, all there was left was love: love for God and love for people. That's a rich retirement. There's a saying, 'The one who dies with the most toys wins.' The truth is, 'The one who dies with the most toys still dies, and they may not have **lived** at all.'"

The rich fool might protest that he believed in God, but when it came to managing his life, dealing with his possessions and planning for the future he lived as if there was no God. His goods and prosperity became the sole pursuit of his life. No sooner has he envisioned his future with his terrific financial portfolio, then God speaks to declare what the future actually holds for him. The rich fool had a wrong view of the future. He was looking down the road, but not far enough. In fact, he was traveling and looking down the materialistic road to nowhere.

Jesus is trying to tell the man who wanted his brother to divide the inheritance with him and everyone who could hear his voice including us that **our life is a trust and one day it will be demanded back.** The rich man presumed he had many years. God says, "Tonight is your last night." What difference does our faith in God make in the practical matters of living – especially when it comes to countering the vice of greed? Dr. Jerome Groopman writes in his book *Measure of Our Days* (p. 225), "As death looms, so much of the success that we have lusted for appears useless and vain."

A pastoral colleague told me the story of a devoted Christian woman who was very active in her congregation. When she died, she left everything she had, which was more than \$500,000, to the church. He was a little nervous about meeting her children, wondering how they'd feel about her decision. He said to her kids, "You must have mixed feelings about this."

All of the children replied, “No, this is exactly what she wanted. We wouldn’t have it any other way.” How do you prepare **not** to receive a material inheritance? **By remembering that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions, and relationships are more important than possessions.** A rich life is one in which we are not **Possessed by our Possessions, and we Live with Others in Mind. It’s marked by Generosity, not Greed and focused on Meaning, not Possessions.** If we win the rat race to accumulate and possess, we’re still a rat. Jesus tells us to seek first God’s kingdom.

A holy man reached the outskirts of a village and settled down under a tree for the night when a villager came running up to him and said, “The stone! The stone! Give me the precious stone!” “What stone?” asked the holy man. The villager replied, “Last night in a dream I was told if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk I would find a holy man who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever.” The holy man rummaged through his bag and pulled out a stone. “You probably mean this one,” he said as he handed the stone over to the villager. “I found it some days ago. You can certainly have it.” The man gazed at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond, probably the largest in the world, it was as large as a person’s head. The villager took the diamond and walked away. All night he tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. The next day at the crack of dawn he went back to the tree, woke the holy man and said, “**Give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily.**” (*Song of the Bird* by Anthony De Mello, pages 140-141).

Jesus says in *Luke 12:32-34*, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**”

Blessing: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” *Matthew 6:24* (NIV) Choose this day who you will serve.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection:

1. Why does Jesus issue a special warning regarding greed? What’s the main lesson about the futility of greed in this story?
2. In *Luke 12:13-21*, what does greed do to the rich man in Jesus’ parable?
3. What does it mean to be (*Luke 12:21*) “rich toward God?” What else could the rich man have done with his extra crops?
4. In *Colossians 3:5*, Paul says that greed is the same thing as idolatry (worshiping a false god). Why is this true of greed perhaps more than other sins? (see also *Matthew 6:24*).
5. It’s hard to fight greed in our culture. Name all the things in culture you can think of (books, music, movies, TV shows) that promote and glorify greed. How do you fight against that pervasive influence? In what areas of your life do you most easily get hooked by greed?

6. Giving our money away is one very effective way to combat greed. But how do we know how much to give away? Is the tithe (10 percent of our income) an effective guide, in your experience? Or is it better to “give as the Lord has blessed us?” Since generosity or giving is a spiritual discipline, what might the discipline involve?
7. Share an example of generosity in the news that really impressed you. Or tell about an act of generosity that someone extended to you or that you witnessed or heard about.

1 Timothy 6:6-10 (NRSV), “Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

Prayer

God of the universe, we are deeply grieved today that yet again a place of worship and prayer has become the scene of murder and mayhem. We weep with the Muslim community of Christchurch, New Zealand where 49 men, women and children were murdered while at Friday prayers in two Mosques. This terrible crime committed upon those at their most vulnerable, in worship, is a sickening continuation of recent assaults on houses of worship including the murder of Jews at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh (10/27/18), and Christians at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas (11/5/17) and Mother Emmanuel African American Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston (6/17/15). There have been many more assaults on houses of worship around the world. We repudiate and reject as ungodly, unholy, and unChristlike the attitudes which foster, excuse or minimize the bigotries and hatred that fuel such tragedies. So many of these violent acts of terrorism and many more have been committed by men who look like me whose minds have been poisoned by the sin of white supremacy and racism. We know there are no easy answers to out of control gun-violence, but it's clear that our "Thoughts and Prayers" are a woefully inadequate response. Lord, have mercy upon us.

Remind us yet again, Almighty God, that our faith calls us to embrace the other, rooted in the conviction that we're all created in Your image. We're part of your family on this fragile earth, our island home in the vastness of space. Inspire us to do our part in the human struggle, to take risks for the sake of love, justice and reconciliation. Help us to find our voice to speak up to those in positions of power at all levels of our society on behalf of the poor, marginalized and oppressed. Deliver us, we pray from dehumanizing stereotypes, irrational conspiracy theories, and hateful speech that lead to the anarchy of violence. Help us to come together and love and stand up for our neighbors, all our neighbors. We pray for the people of New Zealand. We grieve with them and the Muslim community. Inspire us all to stand against

hatred in all its forms. Break down the walls that separate us; unite us in the bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth. Finally, I pray for us words attributed to Saint Patrick whose is remembered this day:

“Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort & restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend & stranger.”

~ Ascribed to St. Patrick, his Breastplate