

Beyond Greed **Luke 12:13-21**

Ugly Family Dispute over Inheritance

As you know, my father was a pastor. He often told me that the most relaxing time for him was Sunday afternoon after all worship services were finished. As a pastor, I now fully understand what he meant. For effective sermon preparation, for years my father cut out newspaper articles for sermon illustrations and sorted them according to themes. The volume of his sermon resources grew over the years and took up two thirds of the bookshelf space in his office. Many pastors who visited my father's office admired his work and wanted to do the same. He proudly told my brother and me that "I don't have any financial inheritance for you but these books and this sermon resource I have collected over the years." The problem was that both my brother and I became pastors while my father's sermon resource was only for one person. There could have been a possible family dispute over inheritance. Fortunately, internet technology rapidly developed, and my father soon realized that all his work over the decades was no longer necessary. You can now google anything and effectively discover news around the world and relevant stories for sermon illustrations in the blink of eye. So one day, my father just discarded his sermon resource, and my brother and I didn't have to go through an inheritance dispute over these newspaper clippings.

Inheritance disputes among siblings are common. It was even common in biblical times. Today's reading begins with a man asking Jesus to intervene in their inheritance dispute. He said, "Teacher, order my brother to give me a fair share of the family inheritance." We don't exactly know the situation. Maybe his brother didn't give what belonged to him or this man just spent all his inheritance and wanted to get more. Anyway, Jesus didn't want to be a referee in this ugly family fight. He refused to judge whose greed was right. Rather than act as a judge, Jesus taught a proverbial truth. "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." He told a famous parable, the parable of the rich fool.

The Parable of Rich Fool

[ppt] This painting you can see on the screen depicts the parable of the Rich Fool by Rembrandt. This painting may help us to understand today's scripture. There is only a single candle in the room so it's dark. An elderly man is sitting at a desk overloaded with books and papers. This man wears a glass on his nose and thoughtfully examines a coin. On the desk are a gold-weigher's scale and chaotic stacks of books and papers, with possibly a huge account book open on the man's right. In that book, large Xs have been marked through some of the entries. Since he thoroughly writes and monitors his financial activities in his account book, it seems that this man is financially conservative and very careful with his money. Does he look greedy in this painting? I don't know. We are not entirely sure about this man, but we can glimpse his character through this painting. Keep that in mind as we get into the parable.

Today's scripture is known as the parable of the rich fool. The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. He was rich, but he became richer from this unexpected good fortune. Conditions of sun, soil, and rain coincided to make him wealthy. However, his fortune brings him a little headache because his barn is not big enough to store the extra harvest so what does he do? He says to himself: 'What can I do? My barn isn't big enough for this harvest.' Then he said, 'Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can

now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!’ (MSG) What do you think of his action? He sounds like a person with good retirement savings and a retirement plan!

Did he do anything wrong in this story? There was no mistreatment of workers or any criminal act in this story. Jacob cheated many people but this man didn’t cheat anyone. He didn’t harm or exploit others to make his wealth. So he was not a bad man or an unjust person. God didn’t call him unjust. Is this man greedy? In our cultural sense, this man would not be considered a greedy person. Imagine you run a business that has thrived over the years and brought you financial affluence. Your company just launched a new product in the Spring and it was a home run! You got a big bonus and put it in your retirement savings account. Would you consider yourself a greedy person for doing this? Yes or no? We call someone greedy if that person has a selfish and excessive desire to possess more than one needs or deserves. This man in the parable does not really fit what we consider to be ‘greedy’ by our standards, however, Jesus points out this man as an example of greed.

Greed

What made this man greedy? The Greek word *pleonexia* is the word that is translated as greed or covetousness. A biblical scholar describes this word 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.”¹ In a biblical definition, greed does not simply mean an excessive desire to get more. Rather, greed is essentially an act of putting oneself at the center of the whole thing. In the parable, this man repeatedly uses the first person singular “I” six times and “my” five times, in addition to speaking to his ‘soul.’ This man was preoccupied with himself and there was no place for others, including God. In his ruthless self-seeking and arrogant assumptions, this greedy man assumed others and things existed only for his own benefit. He expresses no sense of gratitude to God or to the workers who have helped him plant and harvest this large crop. He seems to have no thought of sharing it with others, and no thought of what God might require of him. Because he was so filled with “I,” he was blind to the fact that his life was not his own but belonged to God. So God called him a fool! God showed up and said, “Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?” “That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.” If we simply forget that all that we have and all that we are belong to God, we become greedy, no matter how much we have.

We belong to God

Our lives, our possessions are not our own. They belong to God and we are stewards of them for the time God has given us on this earth. If we understand this truth in our hearts, not only our attitude toward money but also our way of engaging others will be changed. While I served a Korean church in Boston, one of the young adult members was a student at Boston University School of Theology. However, he was not a typical Korean seminarian but very creative. He loved music, dance and painting. He didn’t want to stay inside the church building so he opened a Korean fried chicken restaurant in Kyrgyzstan. Getting more money was not his purpose of opening a business. A vision statement for his restaurant was “to make the world more joyful than the day before.” I sometimes feel that his vision statement is better than our UMC vision statement. He wants his business to be sustainable but at the same time, contribute to local communities. He hired young people, even though many had issues. He became a mentor for them. He opened his restaurant space to local artists and supported students in his

¹ <https://www.ncfgiving.com/stories/wealth-greed-and-a-biblical-view-of-self-interest/>

community. I am so amazed by how he is creatively running and growing his business and at the same time building a community around it. I can say that he is a faithful steward because he knows all that he has and all that he belongs to God and uses his gifts to make the world a better place. In religious terms, he is trying to realize God's kingdom. If you are interested in what he is doing, google "Chicken Star in Kyrgyzstan."

Life is not defined by what we have, even when we have a lot. We find life worth living as we firmly grasp who we are. Who are we? We are God's children and we belong to God. Our possessions, our lives, we owe everything to God and we are called to faithfully use all gifts, time and resources. This sounds burdensome. Yet this truth is actually good news. Because all that we are and all that we have belongs to God, our future is secure beyond all measure. So Jesus tells us, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). So my friends, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed" and be faithful stewards of your money and lives.