

## Message: "The Supreme Irony of Greed"

### Scripture Lesson: Luke 12:13-21

<sup>13</sup>Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." <sup>14</sup>But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" <sup>15</sup>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." <sup>16</sup>Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. <sup>17</sup>And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' <sup>20</sup>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?' <sup>21</sup>So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

In 1987, the film "Wall Street" came out, telling the tale of unscrupulous ongoingings within the world of stock trading. The actor Michael Dougllass played a character named Gordon Gecko, who was a successful but rather unethical Wall Street stock market player; his end game is nothing but gaining in his market plays, whatever it takes. At one point in the movie, Gordon Gecko is addressing a group of shareholders; he is giving a speech of vision for the company, cheerleading them in the pursuit of profit. During that speech, he makes the following statement: "The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, for knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind."

Greed is good - what a message for our world today! I see it often, as do you - examples of the extremes people go to in order to outdo each other with the homes they build and the cars they drive and the vacations they take and the fashion they display; and it doesn't take exorbitant price tags to demonstrate our propensity as a species to be greedy, or, to put it in more kindly terminology, to have much more than we need.

I have sixty-three reusable grocery bags, many of which are inconveniently forgotten in the back of my car when I go shopping; my average shopping experience uses no more than four bags at one time.

I have ten-thousand plastic containers of various sizes and shapes above my workbench, useful for pouring paint into or holding odd assortments of bolts and nails; I am presently using three of them for such purposes.

I have a billion sticky note pads in my desk at home - and I use on average 3.7 individual sticky notes per week, which means I have enough sticky notes to last me seventeen lifetimes.

I have a bin with a trillion pens and pencils collected over the years - and I use such implements less than I ever have in my life, with most of my writing these days taking the form of typing on the computer.

OK, OK, so these are pretty trivial matters, items that are accumulated as much as out of indifference as intention, but it makes the point we can all relate to - that **STUFF ACCUMULATES VERY EASILY IN OUR LIVES**; this may not exactly reflect greed as a motivation, but it is a close cousin to our internal drive that likes to accumulate. And all it takes for this to become a major problem in our lives is the assumption that more is not only better, but that more is essential.

Commentator George Will says that "A need in contemporary America is often little more than a 48-hour-old want." We work that angle quite often I believe, determining that what we want is actually what we need, for comfort, for convenience, for security, for sanity. But Jesus is giving us the caution that any time that which we like grows excessive in our lives, when we add an attitude that actively seeks out more than we need, more than others have, we risk displacing things of much greater importance.

The parable Jesus shares in Luke 12 makes this quite clear - a life set on accumulating all the goods life could ever want or need, building storage barns to keep it all safe and easily accessible, would seem to make sense; our lives on this planet would gain material security that anyone would enjoy. When all is in place, one would think the good life would ensue - the soul says, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." <sup>20</sup>But God sees things differently; God responds 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' <sup>21</sup>So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Simply put, in the pursuit of material security, we may lose our deeper sense of being; we may lose sight of God. We may lose the only security that is real.

All of this begs a question: what does it mean to be secure in life? Is it to have the right amount of life insurance, a good pension plan, a living wage income, a decent home, a manageable debt? One of the questions posed to new candidates for ministry is "Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?" - in other words, are you financially secure? (I wonder if you can guess how many of our candidates hesitate at answering that question?!?). In other words, is security, or happiness, or contentment, or peace of mind, or what we think of as the good life to be found in more stuff - more wealth to make us financially worry-free, more guns to make us protected from violence, more property to ensure space to grow,

more insurance to cover any eventuality, more achievements to demonstrate our worth? But, how can we ever determine how much more is needed?

Kenneth H. Carter Jr. is bishop of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church; regarding the building of bigger barns, he says that "in the pursuit of the good life we become hamsters on a never-ending wheel of motion, moving at a pace that gets more and more difficult to sustain." The material world encourages a hamster-wheel existence insisting on more of the externalities of the world, at the great expense of the internal realities that make life worth living in the first place.

Jesus represents an alternative worthy of life, one that surpasses any material limitation. Cultivating the balance of the inner life is the only thing that can manage the vagaries of the external life, which often have a course set by forces beyond our control. No amount of money can bring back a loved one who died from cancer; no amount of power can completely heal sexual abuse; no amount of property can keep us safe from the effects of climate change; no material wealth can fix a spiritual poverty. But all of these may find solace through prayer; they may find strength through grace; they may find healing through justice; they may find hope through vision; they may find encouragement through relationship; they may find comfort through love. None of these have price tags or bar codes; they have the greater value of lasting impact, enduring character, and enriching depth every life needs. And they are available to anyone who asks, simply for the asking.

In the end, before we cast off that phrase from the movie entirely, I would like to state for the record that, sometimes, greed is good. If we are to be greedy for anything, if greed is ever good, it is only good towards the things that God encourages. Let us be greedy for *Grace*, to receive more in order to spill out and over into other people's lives; let us be greedy for forgiveness, that we may understand the forgiveness God offers as greater than any brokenness we have in our lives, and find the strength to forgive others as we are forgiven. Let us be greedy for compassion, the stretching of ourselves towards others in great need, willing to risk beyond our comfort level yet discover the grace that exceeds our efforts; let us be greedy for justice, not willing to settle for any status quo that lessens another, even if it does not affect us personally. And let us be greedy for God, in the things that God wants in our lives and from our living, and discover that no barns are needed for our lives to be secure.