

The God Called Greed
By Jason Huff
Jeremiah 6:10-16a, Ephesians 5:1-10, Luke 12:13-34

Today's Gospel reading is from Luke 12:13-34. Listen now to God's Word. "Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'"

Frank Sinatra is a legend. His influence extended well past the entertainment world. Yet despite all his fame and power, it was never enough. His daughter Tina wrote how her father performed show after show past 80 years old, even as his health and talent declined. As he told her, "I've got to earn more money. I have to make sure everyone is taken care of." The irony is, at the time of his death, Sinatra's estate was worth between \$200 and \$600 million dollars. There was nothing to worry about! Sadly, his money created rifts in his family after his death. If wealth is the key to happiness, Sinatra's life should have been bliss...but he wasn't.

In the similar story we heard today from Luke, Jesus is teaching His disciples when a man asks him to get in the middle of an argument about an inheritance. He's upset with how his oldest brother is dividing his father's estate, and he thought he'd get Jesus on his side. Jesus uses the interruption to warn his audience just how greed can make money into our god.

Jesus is emphatic. He warns His disciples twice – be vigilant to avoid greed. Life is more than what you have. He illustrates this with the story of a rich man who has a great crop one year. This man has a ton of land, and on top of it all, the harvest is spectacular. It's so big, he can't store it all. He decides to fix that problem by tearing down his old barns and building new ones. That way, he'll be set. At first glance, it sounds like this guy is a really smart farmer who understands the agriculture business, the guy who wins every award at 4H. But when we look closer, we see his greed on full display as his actions actually hurt his fellow man.

In Jesus' day, about 75% of the people were subsistence farmers who barely made a living. This man's storage plan means that the community won't share in the abundance God's provided. If he brought the entire harvest to market, it would lower prices – he wouldn't make as much money, but more people could afford to eat. Instead, this guy is storing his crops so he can sell them at a premium when supplies start drying up. And if we take the man exactly at his word, his barns are full of crops as it is! He has far more than he needs. But he wants to build bigger barns not just for his crops, but for all his goods. The man's wealth is so vast that he's building storage sheds just to house it all! He's got so much, but that's not enough.

And here's the kicker: he's a narcissist. Listen again. "What will *I* do? *I'm* out of room for *my* crops. *I* know what to do. *I'll* tear down *my* barns. *I'll* build bigger ones to store *my* crops and *my* goods. *I'll* say to *myself*, *self*, you've done good." Not once does he credit God for any of it...not for the land he owns, not for the weather and soil and rain, nothing! He doesn't give credit to those who worked his land or helped with the harvest. He's engrossed with the wonderful future he plans to buy himself. But all his wealth can't buy him the one thing he needs...time. All his money can't buy him a single day more. That's why God calls him a fool. And God asks an open-ended question – who's going to get the wealth? The story doesn't mention heirs; he's put off a family to make his fortune. All he has is useless to him in death.

Then Jesus says to his disciples, don't worry about stuff! God feeds the ravens. Now ravens had two strikes against them. By Jewish law they were unclean animals, like pigs. But not only that, the raven was considered a stupid bird. Stories from the time talked about how ravens would forget where they'd built their own nests. They couldn't store up food because they were too dumb to remember where they put it! And yet, God feeds them. If we're worth infinitely more than ravens, how much more is God going to care for us! And look at the lilies – they don't work; they can't work. And yet God makes them so beautiful that the richest king of Israel couldn't dress himself as well. If God takes care of the insignificant things of the earth, how much more will He provide for us – beings He created to exist into eternity!

Here's where God's Kingdom comes in. Unbelievers live for *stuff*. But believers live differently. We are a part of God's Kingdom. What God desires is what's most important. And guess what? When we have God's Kingdom first in our hearts, God provides everything else we need! Jesus tells us, don't fear...God is not only giving you His Kingdom, but He delights in it! He is greatly pleased to do it! This is what God is all about! So if we're a part of God's Kingdom and can store eternal wealth there, why worry about it here? Jesus encourages His disciples to sell possessions and give to the poor because our hearts are with our treasure. If we give to the poor, our hearts are with the poor. If through our actions we store up treasures in heaven, our hearts will be focused on God's Kingdom rather than our little kingdoms down here.

Let's put this into our own lives in a real way today. Here are three practical things Jesus tells us in today's message: *be on guard against greed*. Second, *let God handle your needs*. And finally, *get out from under the burden of stuff*.

First, *be on guard against greed*. In Jesus' day, there was plenty of need. But what we forget is that Jesus' audience was also the wealthy. In Jesus' society, one out of five people were middle class. The crowd surrounding Jesus would have included some who were truly poor, but a good chunk were wealthy...enough that a few weeks following Jesus wouldn't break them. Even 2000 years ago, there were plenty of goods to buy and plenty to be greedy about.

The same is true for us. And worse, advertising is everywhere. You can't drive a mile without seeing ads for something. Unless you have a Tivo, you watch sixteen minutes of commercials every hour you see. They come in the mailbox, on the Internet, over the phone, selling stuff you don't need. We live in a society where the entire economy would fall apart if people stopped buying things they didn't need. I think capitalism is a good system for a lot of reasons, but much of our modern economy is based on selling people luxuries, not needs.

Think about how the world has been affected by greed. Bank bailouts and car bailouts and health care...the problems with all these industries have to do with greed on an enormous scale. And nobody's innocent. There are greedy corporations *and* greedy unions, greedy insurance companies *and* greedy doctors *and*, yes, even occasionally greedy patients. It's a sin that we all face. If you think about it, three of the Ten Commandments are about greed! We're told not to steal or covet; those are easy. But the Sabbath command told the Israelites they couldn't work on the seventh day. All the nations around Israel had a seven-day work week. God made the Sabbath holy so He would be honored...and to show that He would provide for the Israelites even though they didn't work as much as their neighbors.

So how do we guard against greed? We need to be pro-active. We need to decide ahead of time that we are not going to let greed get a foothold in our lives. If we wait until temptation comes, it's going to be too late. How can you be pro-active? One way is to avoid just "going shopping." Now ladies, you take a lot of heat for this, but I've known far too many guys who go into Dick's Sporting Goods to buy a new golf glove and come out with new golf clubs! Determine ahead of time what you need and get out. Being proactive might mean throwing out the ads you get. It might mean watching less TV and avoiding what they throw at you.

It also means knowing the difference between need and greed. In Detroit, you need a car. If you lived in Washington, D.C. or Chicago or New York City or Boston, we could make a good case for public transit. But to get around in this city safely, you need a car. We might be able to get by with one less car, but you still need one. What are you going to buy? Need tells you to buy something reliable that gets you where you need to go. Greed tells you to buy a new car. Yeah, it looks nice and smells nice, but every new car in America loses at least a quarter of its value the moment it pulls off the lot! Buying a car that's even just two years old saves a ridiculous amount of money. Even then as you're choosing, you've got to ask, need or greed?

The key to that issue is contentment. Are you willing to be content with whatever God gives you? That's how you can gain true wealth, physically and spiritually...by holding it lightly. According to the book *The Millionaire Next Door*, over three times as many millionaires live in homes valued under \$300,000 as there are millionaires living in million dollar homes. Most millionaires drive...Toyotas. They've figured out the secret...money can't buy happiness. Contentment means that you can give away so much. Notice that Jesus never, ever says to somebody, "Stop earning a lot of money." God is generous to us so we can be generous back! The parable is not about living a life of poverty. Jesus never says that money itself is bad. He doesn't say to sell everything. It's about being rich to others with the riches you have.

This leads to the second point: *let God handle your needs*. Every last one of us here today, no matter our financial situation, is dependent on God for our needs whether we realize it or not. No one has enough money to stop a terminal illness; no one has enough wealth to no longer be at risk of something coming and taking it all away. So if everybody in the world has something to worry about, it's ironic that God tells us to stop worrying!

But isn't that just like God? I mean, why did God send Jesus in the first place? People throughout history have worried about being good enough to merit God's favor. When Jesus came, He in essence said, "You can stop worrying. Nobody's good enough to meet God's standards. But through my death and resurrection, you will be saved by faith and not by what you can accomplish! No more worrying!" If through our belief in Christ we have eternal life, what are we so worried about?

The real issue is where we put our trust. Trust in money is misplaced trust. Trust in God is always going to pay dividends, even if they aren't immediately apparent. This doesn't mean that God doesn't provide for us through our jobs or through our communities or a hundred different other ways. But we have to practice that trust in real ways. How many of us give to the church once all our other bills are paid rather than when we first get our paycheck or our pension? If we hold back until the next check comes just in case we *might* need it, then that's a lack of trust. This isn't a church issue – we don't know when you're paid, and if you give right up front or on the tail end, we're never going to know. I don't look at any individual giving records. But you know and God knows, and that's where the question of trust lies. Are you willing, no matter how much or how little your tithe might be, to give it to God up front and wait for Him to work out the details? That's letting God do what He promises to do.

Final point: *get out from under the burden of stuff*. Stuff creates a barrier between us and God and between us and other people. Most of us are under a massive amount of debt. Stats say that half of us spend more than we make in any given year. We're in a crisis of our own making. For most of us, what we have barely even belongs to us!

Jesus' teaching to sell our goods and give to the poor actually is wise financial advise for us. Before we can give to the poor, we need to repay what we owe and get out of the poverty we're in ourselves! This isn't just a Jesus thing either. Financial guru Dave Ramsey has five key steps to getting out of debt. One of the most significant ones is selling stuff. All of us have lots of things we don't need!

Now as soon as I start thinking about selling stuff, it starts to hurt inside. I get protective. Those are *my* things. I attach a sentimental value to them. But doing that gives importance to something that's not eternal...something that if I die tomorrow, I'm never going to see again. It's easy to get sucked into believing that our things are valuable...even good things. When I was younger, I bought tons of Christian music and told myself that my CD collection would eventually be valuable. I bought far more than I could really listen to. Most of those CDs aren't worth a dollar now...it was a waste! Good things, godly things, Christian things, whatever...it's all still stuff. When we go past the point of need, we've got greed. When we buy more than what we need, those things become more important than the people around us. They will have an eternity; our stuff won't. It's that simple.

In a couple of weeks, we're going to have the chance to put this message into action, to start providing spiritual wealth for ourselves with the money God has given us. The church needs a new roof. We've been given one more winter before the roof starts leaking and damaging the structure. Two weeks from now, we're going to start a campaign where you can pledge to take care of a square of shingles. For all of us who participate, it's going to require sacrifice...giving up something in order to keep this building running.

Now it's valid to ask, "Is keeping a roof on the church really storing up treasure in heaven?" If this place is just a building to have meetings, then no, it's not. If it's just a place to feel good about ourselves, then no, it's not then either. But if we spend this money so that this building is used to bring people to Jesus Christ and bring up our children in the love and understanding of God, if it's used so that the whole community might see God's goodness working and come to accept Him as Savior and Lord, if it continues to be a place where we feed the poor and offer them not only a meal but Christ, then yes, it is.

So this week and in the weeks and months and years to come, be on guard against greed. Let God handle your needs. Get out from under the burden of stuff. And your heart will be in the right place to give whatever you have to God's purposes that God might be glorified and that we might be storing up treasures that will never rust or fade away.