

But it's only a story

Why Jesus told stories about money
and why we should too

Stories of greed: Guarding against greed

You say, "If I had a little more, I should be very satisfied." You make a mistake. If you are not content with what you have, you would not be satisfied if it were doubled.

– Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Dwelling in the word – Luke 12:15-21

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 towards God."

Monday

Read [Luke 12:15-21](#)

In this week's lesson, Jesus warns against greed and tells the story of a rich man who becomes even wealthier as his land becomes more productive. The man has such an abundant harvest that he runs out of space to store it. To remedy this problem, the rich man plans to build larger barns to store all his wealth so he can rest, relax, and have fun for "many years," unaware that his life will soon end. God calls this rich man a fool. Jesus tells his audience that those who store up treasures for themselves, but fail to be rich toward God, are also fools. (From *Your Treasure Your Heart*, Faith and Life Resources, Harrisonburg, Va., 2008)

So, how do we know if we are being prudent and saving for the needs of the future or if we are being greedy? One rule of thumb for financial management is to give 10 percent, save 10 percent and live on the remaining 80 percent. Everyone's situation varies so this is just a guide. I like this idea of being rich toward God – or trying to give to God at least as much as I am trying to save for my future. As our means increase and our expenses decrease we are able to give more as well as save more. The danger



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is when we tend to our own wants above and beyond our needs. As this successful man's income grew, we do not read anything that suggests his generosity also increased. His only interest is in his own well-being. This seems to be one of the barometers Jesus uses to determine what should be considered prudent and what amounts to greed.

For your reflection

- What are the guidelines you have set up for yourself to guard against greed?
- Have you been able to match your giving goals with your saving goals?

Living below your means has become more in vogue with the economic downturn. To live above our means suggests an unsustainable lifestyle that will lead to unwanted ends. To live within our means suggests that we are taking care of our immediate needs – one paycheck to another. To live below our means allows us to divide our income between our sharing, saving and spending values proportionally.

Over this next week, take time to consider your financial lifestyle and how Jesus might appraise the decisions you are making. If there is imbalance in this part of your life, what changes do you need to make in order to find balance?

Tuesday

Read Luke 12:15-21

In this reading, Jesus tells his audience that greed is dangerous. He warns us to “be on your guard against all kinds of greed,” indicating that there is a danger in coveting possessions we may not immediately recognize. Perhaps he is warning his audience of the seductiveness of materialism. It is difficult in our consumer society to know when we have accumulated enough of anything.

How many necklaces and scarves do we need to accessorize our wardrobe? Similarly, do we need to have a complete tool chest with ratchets or wrenches that will never grab hold of a bolt more than once a year? Why not arrange to share accessories and tools with two to three other families who live nearby? Do we need more than one home? Do we need to buy that shed for the backyard or rent that storage unit when a good old fashion garage sale may take care of the problem? We all know of people with greater excesses than our own! Yet, as we read our magazines and watch television, these **excesses** can start to feel normal.

This is not a call to guilt – rather it is a call to be on guard. What accountabilities do we have in place to protect us from crossing the line between what is prudent and what is **foolish**, to use the words of Jesus.

For your reflection

- What words or phrases stand out to you having focused on Luke 12:15-21 for a second day this week?
- Looking at your own life, what action or decision might cross the line between being prudent with your finances and spending greedily?
- What accountability structures do you have in your life to keep you in check?
- But this is only a story – does Jesus really want us to take this seriously today?

In the late 1990s, there was a popular infomercial on television. Some will recall the Tom Vu infomercials on how to make money. His advertisements vividly proclaimed, “You too can have all this! Come to my seminar!” Watching Tom Vu’s infomercial, one would see him on his large yacht, in front of his estate, or sitting on one of his many luxurious cars. Vu was letting everyone know, “You too can have all this!” He reminded people that if you want to be happy and have a fulfilled life you must have a yacht, a mansion and luxurious cars. Above all, you need money. As it happens, Tom Vu is no longer making these infomercials or selling his seminars. Numerous lawsuits charged he was swindling people through his seminars. In 2009, Tom Vu, known as Tam Vu Pham in court documents, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for perpetrating the largest medical fraud in California’s history. He operated a medical clinic that performed unnecessary medical procedures on mostly low-income immigrants in order to defraud health insurers.

For your reflection

- What are the traps that tempt us to be distracted from being “rich toward God?”
- What other choices could the rich man have made with his abundance?

Wednesday

Read Luke 12:15-21

Jesus directs his warning to the crowds: “Take care,” or “Watch out,” and “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” Jesus in this story is addressing all people. Jesus knows that the issue of materialism and the desire for more possessions is not isolated to only one group of people. It’s something we are susceptible to – whether we are rich, middle class or poor.

Greed is an issue the Apostle Paul addresses as well. In Romans 1:29, greed equates to “wickedness, evil and depravity.” Colossians 3:5 warns of “... evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” Greed is the worship of the creation rather than the Creator. Often a reason for desiring things is the fear and anxiety of never having enough. What is it that we feel we are missing in our lives? Subsequent to this parable, in Luke 12:22, Jesus states “therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life.” It’s a common thing to worry about having enough to provide for ourselves or our family. Desires often reflect a lack of trust in the one and only true Provider. It is no wonder that Jesus warns everyone, rich and poor, against excessive desires or distractions.

For your reflection

- Are you aware of your own areas of vulnerability? What is it that you would be most tempted to build bigger barns over? What is it you worry about most and what temptation does that tend to make you susceptible to as a result?
- In a society of abundance and overindulgence, what does it mean to reject a materialist culture (Romans 12:2)?
- How might Jesus retell this story in our own context?

Thursday

Read Luke 12:15-21

It is evening, and you have just finished supper. You decide to sit down to relax for a few moments. You turn on the TV. “We interrupt this program to bring you a very important announcement. Tomorrow has been canceled!” How ridiculous, you may say.

But is it? For you see, that announcement comes to millions of people in the course of everyday life. For all you and I know, this announcement could come for you and me today.

The truth is, everyone is only a heartbeat away from the announcement that our tomorrow has been canceled. Tomorrow was canceled for the rich man. This was just a story, but it will be each of our stories someday. Notice the often repeated words by the rich fool: "I" and "my."

*"What shall I do,
for I have nowhere to store my crops?"
And 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;
take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.'"*

All this points to this man's selfishness. He was a child of this world's philosophy. You know what that is. "Take care of number one!" He was concerned only about himself and nobody else. He didn't care to help anyone in need. He wanted to get all he could in this life for his personal enjoyment.

This man had success, satisfaction and security. What more could he possibly want? One could say that as far as this world was concerned, he had it made. He was enjoying life. But Jesus makes it clear that true life does not come from an abundance of things. Nor does true life come from success or security. This man had a false view of both life and death.

There are many people like this rich man. In this world, they feel secure and invincible. They think they will live to be 100 years old. They refuse to think of death. They refuse to think of eternity. Their attitudes and actions reveal that they believe this world is all there is. How foolish to think this way. We will all face death, judgment and eternity.

For your reflection

- If you knew that your next week would be "canceled," how would that affect what you value most and how you live the next seven days?
- In recent years there has been this new phrase tossed around – "crossing activities off my bucket list." What are the things you want to do for others or the kingdom before you "kick the bucket?"
- Reflect on any life-altering events in your life that transformed the way you live and the priorities that guide your decisions.

Friday

Read Luke 12:15-21

Our family reads from *Our Daily Bread* after evening meals. Below I share a portion of a reading that I hope inspires you as much as it has me. We need not give in to greed, for there are ways to be on guard against this sin as followers of Jesus.

Greed has toppled highly paid executives, brought down giant corporations, and cost thousands of workers their jobs and retirement funds. One columnist has written that unrestrained corporate greed is a greater threat than terrorism. Greed whispers in our ear that we might be happier if we had more money, more things and more power. It creates discontent and a growing desire to do whatever it takes to gain position and possessions. But the Bible commands us to trust in God, not in "uncertain riches" (1 Timothy 6:17).

Paul told Timothy that the way to overcome greed is to flee from it and to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness” (1 Timothy 6:11). And those “who are rich in this present age,” who have more than is needed, should “be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share” (1 Timothy 17-18).

Contentment and generosity are the opposite of greed (1 Timothy 6-8). As we learn to thank God for what we have and freely share it with others, we stop trying to fill the spiritual vacuum in our heart with things. And when we love Jesus more than money and possessions, we find that He is the greatest treasure of our lives. We discover that knowing Him is the source of genuine satisfaction. (*Our Daily Bread*, July 12, 2004, by David C. McCasland)

Learning together

The Seven Deadly Sins, also known as the Capital Vices or Cardinal Sins, is a classification of vices that have been used since early Christian times to educate and instruct followers concerning humanity's sinful nature. The list of sins includes: wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony. It's interesting to consider the sins that are missing from this list that the church today spends far more time talking about than these seven.

Greed is also referred to as avarice or covetousness. Like lust and gluttony, greed is a sin of excess. Greed is defined as, “an excessive pursuit of wealth, status and power.” St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that greed was “a sin against God, just as all mortal sins, in as much as man condemns things eternal for the sake of temporal things.” Outside of the Christian tradition and writings, greed is viewed as, “an inordinate desire to acquire or possess more than one needs, especially with respect to material wealth.” So, how do we protect ourselves from the subtle enticements to accumulate more than is necessary? How do we resist a culture that encourages us to buy on credit, go in debt and indulge in all that is pleasurable?

It includes a series of real stories of people who were consumed by get-rich-quick schemes with no regard for the impact on the lives of their victims or even their loved ones. It is no wonder Scripture gives such strict warnings about giving in to this destructive sin. Paul's instruction to young Timothy, whom he was grooming for ministry, is a reminder that even those in the service of the church need to be on guard. You may want to show portions of this video to the class and consider the stories of misdirected decisions made evident in the video clips alongside the Scripture texts below.

Ephesians 5:5 – Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and of God.

1 Timothy 6:10 – 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.

2 Timothy 3:1-5 – You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!

The broker

A New York commodities broker goes on a losing streak. Stephen Trantel is out of a job and hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. Broke and desperate, he makes an unthinkable decision. The broker turns to bank robbery. Trantel's loving family still believes he works in the trading pits. He pretends to leave each morning for work ... but secretly goes to the local library. It's easy to learn his new trade. Trantel scours the Internet for bank robbing tips. Trantel needs money fast. He walks into a bank and steals \$10,000 in cash. It's just the beginning. He targets unsuspecting banks on New York's Long Island for easy prey. Over the course of his crime spree, he robs 10 banks for over \$60,000. Nevertheless, he was eventually caught by police, sentenced to nine years in prison and is scheduled to be released from prison in 2021.

CNBC has put together a series entitled *American Greed* that is now available online at www.cnn.com.

For group discussion

- What have you learned from dwelling in Luke 12:15-21 this week?
- Have you ever been the victim of a scam, credit card fraud or outright theft? How did the greed of another affect your life?
- In what ways are you tempted by greed and the get-rich-quick mentality?
- How do you determine how much is "enough" when it comes to possessions, savings, vacations, etc.?
- What is the difference between living above, within or below your means? How do our decisions about our lifestyle impact our susceptibility to greed?
- But these are only stories – does Jesus really expect us to take them seriously today?
- What kinds of socio-economic differences come into play between first century and the 21st century discipleship and our relationship with money?



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