

Parables of Jesus: Greed and Gratitude

Deuteronomy 8:11-18

Luke 12:13-21

We're finally getting to the 7th of the 7 deadly sins! We reflected on the first 6 during Lent: pride, wrath, envy, gluttony, lust, sloth. This morning: greed. And gratitude and generosity as the life-giving ways to overcome greed. In my mind, gratitude is the answer to everything! When in doubt about anything, or struggling with something, and you don't know what to do, make a gratitude list. We can't go wrong doing that!

While this completes the 7 deadly sins series, it continues our current series on Jesus' parables, because Jesus' warning about greed comes in the form of a parable. Like most of Jesus' parables, this one catches our attention with some startling aspects, and some over-the-top parts of the story—including the main character who is kind of a ridiculous character. As I read this parable, though it's serious in the point that it makes, I think it's actually meant to be funny—to show how silly greed, or greedy people, can be. It should cause us to chuckle a bit, even as Jesus uses it to pinch us a bit.

Luke 12:13-21

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."¹⁴But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"¹⁵And he said to them, "Watch out! Be on

your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly.¹⁷ And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'¹⁸ Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'²⁰ 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?'²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

This is the word of the Lord!

Luke tells us that a bit earlier in chapter that Jesus is speaking to a large crowd ("by the thousands" as he puts it). It appears that within that crowd there were all kinds of people. City folks and village folks; people in positions of power, people working behind the scenes; wealthy and poor, younger and older, very religious and not very religious. Jesus is speaking to a very mixed crowd, which is another way of saying that Jesus is speaking to *all of us*, and to *all people*.

I'm guessing that most of us, if we hear the word "greed," reactively think "I'm not really a greedy person." And we're probably right. And most of the people in the huge crowd following Jesus were probably not greedy people. But the warning is posted here anyway! **Because**... the temptation is always at hand. Jesus isn't telling anyone they *are* greedy; he is simply saying "*Be on your guard for it. It sneaks up on you unawares.*" That's the tone here. In our passage, Jesus

doesn't call the guy out and say he's a greedy person. He simply turns to the crowd and compassionately warns them. It's a teachable moment.

One way to look at greed is, as the desire for the acquisition of things without considering what we actually really *need*, or without considering what *others* need. How much is enough?

It's interesting (and funny to me) that before Jesus tells the parable, this really random question comes from the crowd. When we read what came before, Jesus had just been talking about persecution, about the dangers his disciples might face by following him, about being willing to die for what you believe in, and before that, he says don't be like the Pharisees because they're hypocrites. These are consequential matters, and just as Jesus was on a roll with this teaching, this guy randomly calls out: "Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!" Hello!?!? Weren't you listening?? Reminds me of a Jr. high history class: our wonderful teacher was on a roll talking about US presidents, she paused to ask if there were any questions, and someone raised their hand and asked, "Do you know what the cafeteria is serving for lunch today?"

So this guy obviously had his family estate on the brain, and was probably having a dispute with his brother.

Now, bringing a legal case to a Jewish rabbi—a teacher like Jesus—was not an uncommon thing to do. We don't know all the details, but most likely their father had died and left his sons a plot of land. That would have been a typical inheritance back then, and the eldest son was typically the executor of the estate. This younger brother feels like the older brother isn't being fair, or isn't acting fast enough; he is eager to sub-divide the property, or settle the estate, so he asks Jesus to arbitrate and force his older brother to comply with his wishes.

This guy wants Jesus to rubber stamp his plan, but Jesus refuses. "*Who made me your estate lawyer?!?*" is what he is saying. He refuses to be the divider and judge between the brothers, and instead he speaks a word of encouragement (warning, but really an encouragement) to his people: Watch out for greed! There is a lot more to life than getting what you want or think you deserve.

Jesus knows that there is much more at stake here than the brothers' inheritance. Even if Jesus were to take a side in this argument, the real problem would not be solved: the real problem here is a fractured relationship between these brothers. And to Jesus that relationship is more precious than one of them getting what he wants.

My mother and her sister had a fractured relationship after their mother died in Germany. They got into a nasty dispute over who got what. They didn't speak to each other for years, and mom refused to talk about it. The good and positive ending is that they eventually reconciled and became close again. But, as you know, this kind of thing happens a lot in families. And Jesus cares way more about our relationships than about who gets what.

The brother speaking out from the crowd can't see through his own want, and his desire to have what he thinks is rightly his; and it's blinding him. It snuck up on him. And Jesus is telling us that's what greed can do: sneak up on a person and make them blind to what they already have, and focus more on what they don't have.

So Jesus tells a funny parable. One of the things that strikes me about the guy in this parable is that it's all about him, and what makes it funny is that he has this sort of ridiculous conversation with himself. But notice the pronouns:

He says, *"What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? I know, I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build bigger 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 and be merry."*

That's kind of silly and over the top, but did you notice the pronouns? **I, my, MINE.**

How quickly he has taken what God has provided him (through creation) and has made them his own. For this guy, it's all about him.

And Jesus creates a sad and tragic character here, because he is utterly alone: he's talking to himself alone, consoling himself alone, planning & building alone, he's even celebrating his accomplishments alone. Maybe he did have some relationships; Jesus' parable doesn't really tell us. But Jesus paints a picture of man who is so well off, and yet so utterly alone. He's really living in poverty, *relational* poverty – his only relationships are with the things he owns, but now it seems more like his possessions are owning him.

Jesus is telling us how important it is that we acknowledge that what we have, even life itself, is not really ours. We belong to God. The language in this parable is the language of lending. We have what we have as a loan. Even our life and breath. "Tonight your life is being demanded of you" is a way of saying, "Your life was on loan and the lender is requiring this investment to be returned." Jesus uses the language of commerce here, interestingly.

Let's take a step back from this parable for a minute. This man did nothing wrong, nothing illegal. He made prudent and profitable decisions, didn't mistreat employees or exploit anyone as far as we know. God just blessed his land.

The man was just doing what good, responsible people do: you take care of your investments, provide for your future, plan for retirement, and so on. This guy really didn't do anything wrong, did he?

No, not really. There is nothing inherently wrong with accumulating wealth or doing well for yourself or having God prosper you. Tevye prays for it in *Fiddler on the Roof*! "Would it foil some vast eternal plan, if I were a wealthy man?"

So, the issue with the guy in the parable is not that he accumulated wealth. His problem is that he decided that the *result* of accumulated wealth was to relax, eat, drink, and be merry. Probably felt like he deserved to kick back, spend it all on himself, or just plain keep it. This guy either was lucky because of favorable conditions, or he was a good farmer, or both—hard work that paid off when conditions were right for a good crop. Either way, he prospered. That's to be celebrated! The problem is, Jesus says, he's a fool. And his foolishness isn't just that he was selfish. It's that he missed a greater calling. The greater call here is that he didn't live for others. He didn't steward his life and his things for others,

or for future generations. He forgot God—as the Deut.8 passage said not to do, when God prospered them; they were not to think that they accomplished everything by their own power and smarts. He forgot to show gratitude.

Jesus contrasts storing up treasures for ourselves with being rich toward God. And as I understand it, being rich toward God means having a grateful heart, and being generous for the sake of others. That's how Scripture defines being rich toward God, and Jesus explains it in the passage that follows this parable, which we didn't read but it's a familiar one. Jesus' very next words are: "Therefore I tell you don't worry about your life, what you will eat, drink, wear... consider the birds, look at the flowers; God provides for them, God will provide for you. At the end of that passage Jesus says, "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom; therefore, sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven." In other words, being rich toward God means gratefully taking what God has given us on loan, and being generous with it. Then we have true riches, because we are being like God—who faithfully and cheerfully gives out of abundance—the abundance of God's heart.

So, again, there is nothing inherently wrong with wealth. Wealth is a gift.

The issue is, what do we do with it?

There is a contrast here in the entire passage: bigger barns vs. a bigger picture (the bigger picture being the Kingdom of God, and God's taking care of our needs).

Here's a funny Dwight Moody story (he was a businessman and founder of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago): A Hollywood film maker came to Moody Bible institute because they had a beautiful campus and wanted to film part of a movie there, and pay MBI generously for it. Dwight Moody took the request to his board, and the board reacted strongly, saying things like: "Hollywood is the source sin and debauchery and everything wrong with society. Any money you receive from Hollywood is tainted money." Moody's reply was: "The only problem with tainted money is there 'taint enough of it!" His philosophy was: I'll take as much money as I can, because I can use it to bless others and spread the good news. Someone else would get it, so why not us? God won't be offended.

I'd like to share an example as an inspiration, of someone who decided to become rich toward God.

I lived in Oakland, 1986-87... There was a woman in our area named Oral Lee Brown, who became a legend in Oakland. And what's amazing is that she only in recent years has become known for what she did in 1987. She is finally getting the attention she deserves.

In 1987 Oral Lee Brown, who was a real estate agent in East Oakland, became personally aware that hundreds of kids growing up in Oakland were growing up with little family, little hope and no education because so many kids were dropping out of school. So one day she marched into her neighborhood elementary school where she lived and told the principal that she would make an agreement with a class of first-graders. The agreement was, if they would stay in school through graduation from high school, she would get them through college—she would pay for their college education! Now that's bold! But it was a matter of living a Kingdom-of-God-oriented life for her. She had faith, and so she made big and bold promise.

Oral Lee Brown was a single mom with two kids, making an average living selling real estate. Yet she committed herself to a class of 23 first-graders, and it cost her. She had to live much more simply. She had to go without a lot of things

that most people enjoy having. “There were days I just ate rice and beans,” she said.

Four of the kids didn’t make it. They dropped out. But every year she put as much as she could into a trust fund for the children. Along the way she became like a mom to some, and in the end went to high school graduations for 19 students, and then a few years later got busy travelling around the country going to college graduations. Here’s a picture of her with the class of her kids...

Oral Lee Brown became rich toward God. She stored up treasure in heaven and 19 kids, who might have gotten into trouble or just dropped out, graduated from college. Because one woman decided she wasn’t going to build bigger barns for herself. And she derived so much joy for doing this (look at her smile), even if it was a struggle for her at times while she was investing money year after year.

Not all of us can or will do what Oral Lee Brown did. But we can be inspired by her faith, hope and love and the way she channeled her desire to become rich toward God by helping those in her community.

This parable is challenging for me, yet I remembered a great line from Mother Teresa that encouraged me (and made me chuckle): “Give until it hurts,

and then keep giving until you feel so good about giving that you might fall down laughing, for God loves a cheerful giver.”