

Being at war with an attitude of destruction

Luke 12:13-21; James 5:1-5 NSMC

One of my stark memories is when I was with one of my uncles between Christmas and New Year. He was a truck driver and I had the opportunity to go with him to New York City to deliver office furniture to a warehouse. When we arrived the man who greeted us, asked us where his Christmas present was – a case of hard liquor from the company my uncle drove truck for. When my uncle didn't have it, because it was not company policy, the man became very angry. He said much more than I want to remember. But I do remember him pulling out a very thick wad of money, shaking it at us, and telling us, this was what life was about. That surprise lecture has always stuck with me.

If you haven't guessed, today's sermon is about greed, one of the seven deadly sins. I think we all know greed is a problem in this world. We constantly are faced with many examples. An example is a financial leader saying, "I think greed is healthy," to the graduating class at Berkeley's business school. "You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself." The speaker was Ivan Boesky, who shortly thereafter would be fined \$100 million, and later go to prison, for insider trading. His speech was adapted by Oliver Stone as the basis for Gordon Gekko's "greed is good" speech in the movie *Wall Street*.

We know the Bible is full of stories about greed. There is Gehazi, Elijah's greedy assistant (2 Kgs 5:20–27). We know about Achan, his theft and punishment in Joshua 7. God teaches us in the parable of the greedy farm hands in Matthew 21 (33-46). Probably most disturbing of all is Judas Iscariot, who for 30 pieces of silver betrayed Jesus, to force his will on Jesus. (Matthew 26).

The Bible also has many verses about greed or covetousness. Some of the better known are: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." "Some people, eager for money, have

wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." (I Timothy 6:10)

"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Matt 6:24)

"Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." (I Timothy 6:9)

So we know greed is a temptation & a problem. John Paul Roller in a recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, titled, *Greed is Good: A 300 Year History of a Dangerous Idea*, wrote: The problem of money-making was not only that it favored earthly delights over divine obligations. It also enflamed the tendency to prefer our own needs over those of the people around us and, more worrisome still, to recklessly trade their best interests for our own base satisfaction. St. Thomas Aquinas, who ranked greed among the seven deadly sins, warned that trade which aimed at no other purpose than expanding one's wealth was "justly reprehensible" for "it serves the desire for profit which knows no limit."

So we are kind of stuck. We know capitalism is a good thing – up to a point. Greed and wealth has brought us the standard of living we have today. It has created wealth that has been used for many good purposes. But it's a good desire that so easily gets on the wrong track. We know working hard is important, but we also know if we work simply for money, or use any method to gain wealth, & long for & worship the things that come with wealth we are headed for trouble.

It's fascinating that in China today, so many people have become very wealthy so fast, that the government is cracking down on ostentatious displays of wealth. Why? First, they are nervous about corruption. Second, they are nervous the majority of the citizens will become dissatisfied – causing problems for the government. Third, they are nervous that

when citizens make wealth their life goal, it will supersede supporting the Communist Party & the government. Fourth, they recognize the destructive power of greed.

Morally right efforts to gain wealth are not evil. It's all about the heart and intent. But I think we also know, or at least sense that our culture tempts us to over focus on money. In a post called, "How to Motivate Your Prospects," we learn what advertisements are trying to get us to do: "As an advertiser, it is your job to create discontentment inside the psyche of your prospects, and make them desire the change that you're offering." Advertisements are so clever that we keep high levels of debt for our wants.

A commentator from Israel offers this insight: "Because producers covet consumers' money, they need to get consumers to covet their goods. Social historians note a change in advertising after World War I, from conveying product information to manufacturing desire. Business people feared the public was too frugal. To rev up the economy, products were associated with images, glamour, and personal identity.

"Marketing moved from fulfilling needs to creating them. 30 years later, the post-World War II boom gave us planned obsolescence, whose most recent incarnation is the need for continual upgrading of our electronic gadgets." I would add, the latest marketing tells us we deserve – whatever is being advertised. So way too many Canadians live with lots of debt.

In contrast to our culture's clamor for coveting or greed, the last five of the ten commandments point out the dangers of greed. Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Don't covet. All of these often are tied to greed in some way. (Ex 20:13-17)

And how many international tensions have greed as one of their reasons? Are we sure the pressure on Venezuela isn't just because we want to get control of their oil? How much is

the rationale for the present conflict in Syria, with Turkey invading Kurdish held territory, a battle for oil?

Another sign of how greed affects us is, think of its euphemisms where we downgrade greed's reality and call it by pet names like consumerism or hoarding or extreme couponing or simply "saving up for the future." We feel its intense pull when contemplating a gift, walking store aisles, flipping through a catalogue, passing a billboard, watching ads online or on TV, and considering how little to tip the waitress. It's a nasty weed that has taken root not only "out there" in our society and among our acquaintances, but "in here," in our churches, in our own families, and in our own hearts.

Remember the old "Dennis the Menace" cartoon strip where Dennis is looking through a Christmas Toy catalogue saying, "This catalog's got a lot of toys I didn't even know I wanted."

Greed is never a sin of which we find ourselves guilty. It is happiest when pointing the finger. It is always the problem of *other people*. So I invite you to reflect on your relationship with money and wealth. How does money affect you? What struggles do you have with wealth? We know we don't have to be rich to be greedy. How are we tempted? How much is enough? Do you possess wealth or does wealth possess you?

To summarize why greed is considered a deadly sin, here are 4 points. **First**, greed deceives us. That's its nature. We never have enough.

Second, God warns us about greed so often because it is the pathway that leads us to embrace other sinful behaviors and attitudes. Billy Graham said that greed "is probably the parent of more evil than all the other sins."

A **third** reason the early church leaders named greed as a deadly sin is because greed blinds us to what is really important in life –

relationships, love, mercy, forgiveness, and generosity.

Fourth, greed can and probably will push God and other people out of our lives. Greed is not just a matter of desire, but becomes idolatry. Greed is a worship of money, wealth, things, and self, for their own sake. In greed, our desires get the better of us, bringing out the worst in us.

So we have to recognize the strong pull of our culture that surrounds us with greed. We have to resist its temptation and pull within each of us in various ways. And we must intentionally choose opposing virtues like – generosity.

Generosity or charity, is placed opposite greed. In releasing that which could control us, we return our trust to God. Additionally, as we generously share that which has been gifted us, we become a blessing to others.

Abba song Money, Money, Money

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETxmCCsMoD0>

Pink Floyd song Money

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpbbuaIA3Ds>