

**GOD OR GREED?
Luke 12:13-21**

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Her story is our story – at least I know it’s my story, and it sounds like the story of the rich man in the parable of Jesus.

What do you and I, the rich man and Alice Klee all have in common? We’re all smothering in our own greed.

The report went out that Alice Klee, 68, was missing. But eventually the New Milford woman was found dead in her apartment. Her mummified body was hidden beneath clothing and clutter that had actually concealed her body for months during earlier searches.

Due to her prolonged absence, her landlord finally got legal permission to clean out her apartment. It was just by chance that a handful of hair was sticking out from her heap of hoarding. The police had already conducted a search of her apartment, but in the plethora of piles, they could not even make their way fully inside the home.

Alice Klee, you might say, was literally buried in the bunch of her stuff. Her greed for more became her grave. (www.foxnews.com/us/2013/04/18)

We keep collecting because we never think we have enough.

As one writer observed,

For me, and for many of us, our first waking thought of the day is “I didn’t get enough sleep.” The next one is “I don’t have enough time.” Whether true or not, that thought of not enough occurs to us automatically before we even think to question or examine it. We spend most of the hours and the days of our lives hearing, explaining, complaining, or worrying about what we don’t have enough of.... Before we even sit up in bed, before our feet touch the floor, we’re already inadequate, already behind, already losing, already lacking something. And by the time we go to bed at night, our minds are racing with a litany of what we didn’t get, or didn’t get done, that day. We go to sleep. We go to sleep burdened by those thoughts and wake up to that reverie of lack.... This internal condition of scarcity, this mind-set of scarcity, lives at the very heart of our jealousies, our greed, our prejudice, and our arguments with life. (Lynne Twist, *The Soul of Money*)

Enough?

Outside of speaking about the Kingdom of God, Jesus speaks more about materialism than He does any other topic. Of course, the Kingdom of God is the overarching topic about everything concerning which He speaks. So setting that aside, we have to say that money was Jesus' favorite topic. But we had just as soon our preacher skip over it!

In this story, most likely a younger brother comes to Jesus seeking a judge to settle their inheritance squabble. This interruption in Jesus' teaching about kingdom values is a rude reminder of how oblivious the average listener can be to Jesus' message about God's reign invading all of life and turning the world and its values upside down (David Garland). "I'll not preside over your greed," Jesus answers. With that warning against greed, he began to tell the parable about the rich fool.

I was a chaplain at Methodist Hospital in Dallas. A man died. One of the chaplain's duties was to make sure that the next of kin received the personal possessions of the dead. I called his daughter since the person with him (his girlfriend, I suppose) was not the legal next of kin. I asked, "Mary wants to take the ring on his finger with her. Is that okay with you?"

"No, that's not okay. She's already taken too much. Tell her she'd better not touch that ring on his finger. It's to stay there until I get there."

I looked to Mary and said, "Mary, I'm sorry, but I cannot let you have that ring, as per the instructions from his daughter. She doesn't want you to have it." Mary rolled her eyes.

Fighting over the ring of a dead man with the body still warm.

Right then and there I said, "Dear God, when it comes time to settle the accounts with my siblings, I'll not argue about the possessions of the dead. My life will never be reduced to grasping with greed over the stuff of the dead."

It may be that the older son, the new leader of the clan, is trying to keep the family farm together for everyone's good.

Jesus said here, "I'll have no part of it. I'll have nothing to do with being arbitrator over your greed."

Then he tells a story, a very disturbing story. It's the story about a farmer. He was a rich man. "I'm so rich. I have so much. Where am I going to put all of my crops? I know, I'll just tear down these little barns and I'll build bigger barns. Then I'll have great success because I'll have my income set aside for many years to come, stored safely in my barns. Yes, I'll just relax and eat, drink, and be merry."

But God said to him, "You fool, this very night your soul is required of you. And then who will own what you have prepared?"

Seneca philosophized, "How stupid to plan out the years that lie ahead when you are not even master of tomorrow. What madness to start out with long-term hopes, thinking, "I'll buy and sell and build, I'll lend money and take back more, and I'll gain possessions of honor. When I'm too

old and tired, I'll retire." Believe me when I tell you everything is unsure, even for the most fortunate (*Ep.* 101.4).

So it is with the man who lays up earthly treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.

Somehow or another, we have not really bought into the idea that we're just passing through, that we're just stewards of a small part of the possessions of this world for a short while. As scripture says, "Naked you've come into this world, and naked you'll go" (Job 1:21).

In Ecclesiastes 8:8, the preacher says, "As no one has power over the wind to contain it, so no one has power over the time of their death."

When you think about it, babies do come into this world absolutely naked, grasping nothing in their hands. But it's not long until they learn to say "mine, mine, mine" and grab everything they can. And then they die, empty-handed.

The rich man in this story is self-centered. Greed makes us very self-centered. We want more, and we want more for ourselves. We're not in the business of giving away. We cease to be stewards and we become hoarders.

Notice what he says. "What shall *I* do since *I* have no place to store *my* crops. This is what *I* will do. *I* will tear down *my* barns and build larger ones, and there *I* will store up *my* grain and *my* goods. And *I* will say to *my* soul...." He's self-centered. Greed makes us that way.

The real Patch Adams, the doctor who was portrayed by Robin Williams in the popular Hollywood film, says greed has infected our society. It is the worst infection. (*Affluenza*, p. 29) Madonna has said "We live in a material world, and I'm a material girl."

Our greed has even trickled down to Native Americans. At least ten of California's thirty-nine gaming tribes – tribes of Indians that are allowed to participate in the gaming industry – have kicked out members or denied them a share of casino profits in recent years. They expelled the members telling them they didn't have ancestral proof to qualify for membership or casino dividends. The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs cannot do anything to help these Indians, because each Indian tribe is a sovereign nation, free to decide its own membership issues. The Indians are fighting among themselves. "What really tears me apart is people saying, 'You're not an Indian; you don't belong to the tribe.' Before gaming, we were all Indians," said Matt Franklin, vice chair of the Miwok. But not now, now that they're dividing the pot. ("Gaming Greed Incites California Tribes to Deny Members," www.casinowire.com/archive/200102/2258.shtml)

I want say quickly four things about greed.

I. Possessions will not fulfill you.

Jesus was saying that to the man in the story. Possessions will not fulfill you. Having more will not make you happy. The more Americans fill their lives with things, the more they tell pastors,

therapists, friends, and family members that they feel empty inside. The more toys we buy our children, the more they complain of boredom. That's a fact.

Jesus predicted this 2,000 years ago when He said, "What profit would it bring a man if he were to gain the whole world but lose his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). We are losing our soul to material things.

When Mother Teresa came to the United States to receive an honorary degree, she said, "This is the poorest place I've ever been in my life." Now remember where Mother Teresa had been. "She wasn't talking about economics or mutual funds, Wall Street or the ability to consume," says Robert Seiple. "She was talking about the poverty of the soul." (*Affluenza*, p. 70)

To paraphrase a statement from Warren Buffett, "Before you try to keep up with the Joneses, let me tell you that I know the Joneses and they are no happier than you are." (*USA Today*)

Things will never, ever satisfy. They will not bring us fulfillment. We all know that's true, yet we continue to behave as if driving a bigger, newer car, having a bigger, better house, or possessing more gadgets would finally, in the end, bring us some type of fulfillment.

We're fools as possessions trick us time and time again. Purchase in and purchase out – year in and year out. We just don't catch on, do we?

The rate of clinical depression in the United States is ten times what it was in 1945. The year that the highest percentage of Americans described themselves as "very happy" reached a peak, never to be exceeded, in 1957. We felt richer then, though we were poorer. We have more than doubled in regard to the GNP (Gross National Product) now as we did then. Everybody's house has twice as much stuff in it now. But we don't feel affluent. We don't have a sense of well-being or happiness.

II. Our possessions, in reality, possess us.

Warren Buffet said, "**Most people's biggest expense is interest, which comes from living beyond your means and buying things they think will impress others, which comes from insecurity. Avoid these and you'll grow richer than most of your peers.**" (Warren Buffett, *USA Today*)

Our possessions end up possessing us. Interestingly enough, Steffan Linder, a Swedish economist, not even a theologian, made the prediction in 1970 that our possessions would possess us. He said buying more gadgets and more things will not yield us free time. We will soon be the "harried leisure class." "Economic growth," wrote Linder, "entails a general increase in the scarcity of time.... As the volume of consumption goods increases, requirements for the care and maintenance of these goods also tends to increase, we get bigger houses to clean, a car to wash, a boat to put up for the winter, a television set to repair, and have to make more decisions on spending." (*Affluenza*, p. 41)

All the stuff we own has to be cleaned, maintained, polished, adjusted, stored, refueled, tuned up. The list goes on and on. Having stuff takes a lot of time. In fact, using Labor Department Statistics, Harvard economist Juliet Schor says full-time American workers work one more month, 160 more hours, a year than we did in 1969. (*Affluenza*, p. 42) But ninety-five percent of our workers say they wish they could spend more time with their families. (*Affluenza*, p. 4)

We're building bigger barns. But our bigger barns are, in reality, making us prisoners.

III. Success is not in how much we accumulate, but, rather, in how much we give away.

That was the mistake of the rich man in the story. He thought having the bigger barns would make him a success.

We should not live to accumulate. We live to love, to share, and to generate goodness.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the residents of hell are being punished for the deadly sins that characterize their runaway lives. The picture drawn from greed is the image of a person in hell with his head pushed down to the dirt with the caption saying, "I've turned my back on heaven." (Rowland, *The Sins We Love*, p. 134)

Pastor Bruce Larsen tells the story about a wealthy man who came to his office when he pastored a Seattle church. The pastor was speaking about tithing and saying the first way to get yourself freed up and properly prioritized is to give ten percent of what you make, to God's Kingdom, to His church, as an act of faith and love. The pastor cited research in the field of psychology that demonstrated that people who are givers are happy, live longer, and manage money more responsibly.

The rich man in the church came to see the pastor. "You've been talking a lot about tithing lately. I'm definitely listening. But Bruce, I make a ton of money. I can't possibly afford to tithe. That would be a huge hunk of cash."

Bruce, the pastor, said, "Well, let's just pray about it." The man agreed and the man started praying by asking God for guidance in the matter of giving. The pastor, Bruce Larsen, prayed next. "God, help my dear brother here earn less money this coming year so that he can afford to tithe."

If you can't afford to tithe, maybe you need to be making less money.

Isn't that amazing? You'd think that people who make more money could more easily give ten percent of their income – that they would be so grateful that God had opened the windows of heaven and poured out His blessings upon them that they would be the first in line to tithe.

But in reality, congregation, it's those who earn less who are more apt to give.

How can anyone be so miserly and stingy as to argue, "I can't give because I have too much." That seems preposterous to me. Your success is not determined by how much you store. Be

grateful to God if He's blessed you with so many possessions and such a wonderful income that you can give a lot.

IV. How do you know if greed has gotten hold of you?

I will be candid. Have you organized your family's finances in such a way that you give God ten percent, the first of all your produce? Proverbs 3:9 says, "Honor the Lord with the firstfruits of your harvest." It's an agricultural metaphor. Farmers wanted to bring a tithe of their produce to God.

If you've not so ordered your life, if you've not got your house payments and your car payments in such a way that you can honor God by giving ten percent to His place of worship here at the church to do His work for His kingdom, you have been bitten by the greed bug.

Tithing isn't really about money. It's about the condition of your heart before God. If you can't say yes to tithing, perhaps you're saying yes to greed.

A story is told of a man who took his son to McDonald's and bought him some French fries. He didn't order anything, but as his son sat down to eat a pack of hot, salty fries, the dad reached across the table to take one. "No," said his young son, "these are mine." The man thought to himself, "Does he not realize who bought him those fries? Does he not realize I have enough money in my pocket that I could go buy twenty-five packs of fries? I could cover the boy up in fries if I wanted to. Does he not understand that should he refuse to share I could resolve in my own heart never to buy him another pack of fries for the rest of his life? Does he really not realize the fries are not his? They are only his because I have given them to him."

God has given us all that we own. And how do we say, "No. Mine," and refuse to be obedient when it comes to rearranging our lives to tithing? According to 1 Chronicles 29:14, God is the sole owner of all that we possess, including our very selves.

We need you to tithe so we can conduct our ministries. But I want to promise you this. You need to tithe, if you're a member of this church – you need to tithe for your own sake, for your own family's sake, for your own spiritual health more than we need you to tithe. For while our ministries will suffer, your greed will be the very thing that, in the end, will make you foolish for grasping the treasures of earth but refusing the treasures of heaven.

This farmer stored the wrong kind of treasure in the wrong place and is spiritually bankrupt. How about me? How about you?