

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

¹⁴ Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

¹⁸ “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. ¹⁹ 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.”’

²⁰ “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?’

²¹ “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:13-21)

Be On Guard Against Greed

A couple of months ago, a house in the neighborhood just north of the church went on sale. They were having an open house so my wife and I decided to go have a look. It was beautiful. They had taken an older home and expanded it and filled it with antiques. The master bedroom had a study attached to it. The kitchen was gorgeous. The yard and the garden had actually competed in gardening contests. So I picked up one of the sheets to see what they were asking. Let’s just say there was no point in even taking that sheet home. We will never be able to pay that much for a house. Have you ever had an experience like that? Have you ever looked at a house and just been in love with it and then you calculated the payment and you realized that you’d have to stop eating to buy it – and even then it might be a stretch? How did you feel afterward? I’ll confess, that made me feel just a little jealous of people who can afford to live in places like that. Of course, I felt that way because there’s a part of me that wants that lifestyle. Jesus uses a different example this morning, but I think his point is the same. All around us, there are things that we want and that we want more of. Jesus warns us, **be on guard against greed.**

I.

Someone said to Jesus, “**Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.**” Clearly, this man felt that he was being wronged by his brother. And he may very well have been right. That kind of thing happens all the time. And the story Jesus used to illustrate his point is also something that can and does happen: a man finally retires but he dies before he gets to enjoy the wealth he’s saved up. The reality of these situations teaches us something about greed: it’s always there, lurking right around the corner. My friends, **be on guard against greed. It sneaks into our lives.**

Jesus’ parable can make us feel just a little uncomfortable, don’t you think? A man had a very productive farm. In a world without chemical fertilizers or weed killers or bug sprays, to say nothing of modern farming equipment, bringing in a good crop made you wealthy. It’s clear that this man had successfully done that, year after year. He had many good things laid up for many years. He was so good at it he didn’t even have room anymore to store his crops and his “many good things.” So he had to tear down his barns and big bigger ones. To you and me, that just looks like being a successful farmer and businessman, right? So what was wrong with he did?

In truth, there was nothing specifically wrong with anything he actually did. God never says that it’s a sin to be rich or successful. God does not condemn planning for the future or preparing for our retirements. Your 401(k) is not a sin. The problem was in his heart. He did all these things because he was greedy. And the really scary thing about it is that he might not of have thought of himself as a greedy man. But it’s clear that he had spent his entire life in the pursuit of wealth. When he finally felt like he had enough piled up to live in comfort for the rest of his life and he was looking forward to his golden years, God told him his time was up. He died and someone else inherited all the fruits of his labors.

What is it about this parable that makes us uncomfortable? I think we could all see ourselves in this man and his efforts. And that, of course, is exactly what Jesus wants. We're told all the time to plan for our retirement. Are we like this man? It isn't just a question of piling up as many "good things" as we can. Greed creeps into our lives in other ways, too. Most commercials that you see on TV are designed to make you discontent with your car, with your furniture, with your clothing. Of course, the subtle message is that you won't be happy unless you go out and buy more or better stuff. What about all the times that we gripe and complain about missed opportunities? About being wronged? About not getting our fair share of the inheritance or other people getting better presents or better paychecks than we do?

Greed sneaks in. Now, don't get me wrong. God wants us to plan for the future and be good stewards of the gifts he gives us. It's a sin to waste his gifts on wild living and buying things we can't afford. It's not wrong to buy a nice house or a new car, if God gives us the wealth to do that. It's not wrong to go to court when you have been wronged. But the problem that we face is just how hard it is to be content with what God gives us and just how easy it is for those things to consume our lives. Where is the line between being a good and faithful worker and being all about money? It's hard to find sometimes. Our society values wealth. Our kids want the best phones and the newest computers, and they learn that from the people around them. And they learn it from their own sinful hearts, just like we adults do. Jesus is warning us that even we believers could find ourselves slipping more and more into greed. Finally – like any sinful attitude – that greed could destroy our faith.

But Jesus does not abandon us to our sinful attitudes. He warns us about the danger. More than that, Jesus works in our hearts to help us overcome that danger. He tells us, his children, to be on guard against all kinds of greed. How can we do that? There's only one way: by remembering God and his love. God loves us so much that he sent his one and only Son to die for all of our sin – that includes the greed that worms its way into our hearts. Jesus paid even for that sin and then he rose to tell us that we are forgiven forever. Jesus rose to tell us that we have the greatest gift we could ever have. We have eternal life coming. We will live forever with Jesus and have all our wants and needs provided for. We will have perfect joy while all unbelievers are squirming in hell. That gift is greater than the most beautiful house, the nicest car, the newest phone we could ever get here. Every time we hear about that gift, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to give us strength to turn away from greed. Fix your heart on what God has done for you and what God has given you, and strive to be content with what he allots you here, in this short and poverty stricken life.

II.

What is it that makes greed so dangerous? It's not just that it sneaks into our hearts, although that should warn us about it. It's not just how universal it is in our experience, although again that should warn us about it. The real problem with greed is that it takes over your life. It puts lifestyle and money in the place that God is supposed to have. That is Jesus' real concern. **Be on guard against greed. It takes God's place.**

To make sure we understand his parable, right at the end, Jesus said, **"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."** Notice, Jesus doesn't say, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself." Abraham was a rich man and yet he was a faithful believer. The question is whether wealth and stuff keep us from being rich toward God. Greed becomes our god in at least two ways. One way is when all we think about is money. Now, nobody here is going to say that's true about themselves. But think about it. Does going to church take second place to working? I don't mean one week a month because you have to take your turn. Do you only make it to church a couple of times a year because you have to work – or because you have to keep up your house or your yard? What is coming first in your life? The rich man in Jesus' parable wanted to store up all he had for himself. It never entered his mind to share his wealth with others. How much of your wealth do you give to the poor? How much do you give to the Lord? If you have to stick a crowbar in your wallet to pry it open so that you can throw a couple of bucks in the offering plate, if you can't be bothered to help people who are in need, then maybe money has taken God's place in your life. If you hate to see the notice in our bulletin about how far behind we are because it makes you feel uncomfortable about your own giving, what does that tell you about your attitude?

But that's not the only way that greed takes over our lives. The other way is fear. God promises that he will give us everything we need. But that doesn't mean that we can always see how he's going to do it. It doesn't mean that we will always be able to make house payments or car payments. If we overextend

ourselves, God doesn't promise he will always bail us out. Sometimes, we Christians find ourselves agonizing over money. We worry about how little we have saved for our retirement and about how we're going to pay for our health insurance when that time comes. We worry about the incredible cost of a nursing home. We run up credit card debt and we can't get out of it. So we lie awake at nights, tossing and turning and we can't shut our brains down. Money and lifestyle have just pushed all God's promises out of our heads.

In the end, greed is a form of idolatry. St. Paul says that people who want to get rich fall into a trap and many times, lose their faith. That's what Jesus is warning against. What a sad thing it would be to spend your whole life accumulating money and stuff, and then die and go to hell. That is the danger.

Can any of us claim that we are never guilty of greed? I know I am. What is the answer? The answer is to be rich toward God. What does that mean? It means to have faith and to grow in faith. Jesus did die and pay for our greed. The truth is, Jesus' had the only perfect heart that any human being ever had. He's the only one of us who never put anything else in God's place in his heart. That now counts for us. His life, his death, his resurrection makes us holy in God's sight. We are rich toward God when we know that. We are rich toward God when we trust that. And we are rich toward God when that faith changes our lives and our hearts. Why are Christians generous to the poor and to the Lord? Not to earn a place in heaven. We have that already! But when you're rich toward God, his love overflows from your heart in words and in actions. We are rich toward God when our faith is strong and vibrant and it changes the way we think and feel, the way we speak and act.

We all have room to grow in that department, don't we? I do just as much as you do. But that is the beauty and the wonder of God's love. He helps us grow. In truth, he makes us grow. He does that first of all by forcing us to take a good hard look at ourselves and see our sin and failure. But then he comes with that sweet message of forgiveness and life. That message is the power of God. It changes our hearts and our lives. God comes to us in communion and forgives us. God comes to us when our pastors announce our forgiveness. God comes to us in the memory of our baptism, and in all that gospel, he keeps building our faith and making us rich toward him.

That is why we keep coming back here. To be richer toward God. That shows itself in our lives. We live in an age that doesn't really think that your faith should make much of a difference in how you live. But God teaches us again and again that what's in your heart overflows into your life. And quite frankly, my friends, if there is no overflow of God's love, if we spend all our time in pursuit of a higher standard of living, if we can't be bothered to hear his word and we don't want to examine our commitment to his work, then it's pretty clear what's in our heart and what's missing. But it's never too late to change. As long as you are breathing here, Jesus is calling you to remember his love. Be rich toward God. Trust that you are loved and forgiven and cling to that message. Be rich toward God. Fill your heart with the good news of his love so that it overflows every day in generosity and love. Be rich toward God. It's the best way to keep all kinds of greed away. Amen.