

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 15, 2004

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Luke 12:13-21

¹³ 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." (NIV)

Greed or God?

"The point is, ladies and gentleman, is that greed—for lack of a better word—is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all its forms—greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge—has marked the upward surge of mankind."

Anybody recognize those words? They come from the 1987 movie "Wall Street." They were spoken by Michael Douglas's character, an aggressive capitalist named Gordon Gekko. His philosophy was that greed, that desire that has no end, is what drives human beings to greatness. Therefore, he said, "Greed is good."

Maybe he's right. Maybe greed is good. For the most part, those who get ahead in this world are those who really want to. Look at most billionaires. They didn't get their money by sitting and waiting for someone to give it to them. They wanted it bad, and that desire led them to go and get it. Or take the Olympic athletes who are about to compete in Athens. They didn't get where they are by shrugging their shoulders and saying, "Practice today? Nah." It was desire that led them where they are. Maybe insatiable desire, which we call "greed", is, as Gordon Gekko said, good.

Another example. One day, as Jesus is speaking to a large crowd, a man comes up to him and says, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." He was probably the younger brother. The law back then said that the elder brother got two thirds of the inheritance and the younger brother got one third. But see, this guy is not satisfied with his share. He wants more. So he comes to Jesus hoping that Jesus will act as a judge. And the man doesn't want a hearing or a trial; he wants a summary judgment: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." You have to admire his guts. Don't you?

Jesus doesn't. He replies to the man's request, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" In other words, Jesus tells the man that there are other people in the land whose vocation it is to settle legal disputes. And Jesus is also hinting at something else, a truth that transforms the way we look at greed and God and just about everything else. More on that later. At any rate, Jesus tells the man and the crowd that greed is, in fact, not good: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

"Be on your guard against all greed. A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." To make his point another way, Jesus goes on to tell a parable. It's about a rich man who one year has a bumper crop. He owns some land that is farmed, and his fields produce abundantly, more than usual. What's he going to do with all this grain? He deliberates carefully, thinking to himself, "I don't have enough room for all this! (A nice problem to have, as problems go!) What shall I do?" He decides: "I know. I'll tear down the barns I have and build bigger barns to take their place!"

Let's hit the "pause" button for a moment. What do you think of this man so far? It's kind of odd that he's tearing down his old barns, I guess; why does he need to? But aside from that, he's not doing too badly, is he? I mean, he's using his resources wisely. He's saving some of his resources for the future. Why, we could use more people like this man! Saving for the future is vital. We encourage our young people to save a portion of their money, don't we, instead of letting them spend it as soon as they get it? We could hire this guy to do financial planning seminars!

Or maybe we should wait till we've considered the rest of the parable. Let's hit the "play" button again and see if we can get more insight into what this man is up to. Jesus lets us in on what the rich man was thinking: "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. 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."" Ah, now we see. We see where this man is coming from. He's not setting his wealth aside to be wise or prudent as much as he is squirreling away his wealth to be selfish. Jesus gives us clues to this attitude in the man's words: "What shall I do? This is what I'll do... I will store my grain and my goods... I'll say to my soul, "O soul, you have plenty of good things stored up for many years. Live a life of relaxation! Eat! Drink! Live a life of enjoyment!" Note all the emphasis on "I", "me" and "myself"? And looking back at the man's deliberations, we note that something's missing. Not once does

he thank God for giving him his wealth. Not once does he think about what God wants him to do with what he's been given.

Jesus reveals the man's heart. He had lots of money, but toward God he was utterly bankrupt.

The story continues. The very same night that the rich man made his plans, God decided to change them. 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?' "You fool!" The rich man didn't get it. He didn't understand the reality of what was happening. He failed to recognize some critical things:

- He failed to see that *wealth doesn't last*. That what the Teacher in the lesson from Ecclesiastes learned (Eccl 1:2; 2:18-26). He realized that a person can work his fingers to the bone, desiring wealth, earning wealth. But when life ends, he can't take any of it with him.
- The rich man failed to see that *this life isn't all there is*. Paul reminded the Colossians of that in the Scripture we heard earlier (Colossians 3:1-11). Paul reminds Christians that their real life is not the life of the sinful nature, which looks for one self-indulgent pleasure after another. No, real life is with Christ in God. This spiritual life the rich man had no understanding of. He failed to realize that one day all his possessions would be gone and that he would stand face to face with God.
- The rich man failed to see that *God was in control*. The man evidently thought that his own business sense and ag management skills had brought him his wealth. But all along it was God who was giving him good gifts. And it was God who would one day take them away.

Our first instinct might be to shake our heads at this rich man. But before we do, we should compare ourselves to him. Wealth doesn't last. Are we aware of that? Have we always kept that in mind? Have we remembered always that it's God who gives and takes away, thanking him for what he gives and being content when he doesn't give? Or have we acted as if the stuff we have is ours, we have a right to it (we earned it ourselves, after all!) and that God should respect our property? This life isn't all there is. Have we always acted that way? Or have we spent a whole lot of time and energy getting and keeping "stuff", material things, while we have spent little energy or time on God's things, things that do last?

Wouldn't it be the height of tragedy if the things we thought were so important in this life turned out not to be that important at all? Wouldn't it be the height of tragedy if the things we ignored and marginalized in this life turned out to be the most important things of all?

Should God be patting us on the back for having our priorities all in order? Or should he be saying, "You fool"?

See why Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions"? See why he says at the chilling conclusion to his parable, "This is how it will be with anyone

who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God"? He wants to open our eyes in a way that the rich man's eyes never opened—until it was too late, that is. Jesus calls us to repent of our selfish views of material possessions. He warns us of the spiritual destruction to which greed will lead.

But there's more. Jesus also points us to true wealth and true life, even as he exposes temporal wealth and false life. Remember the comment Jesus made to the man who told Jesus to give him a bigger share of the inheritance? Jesus said that his job was not to be a judge or an arbiter. Then what was Jesus' job? Jesus' job, his mission as the Christ, was to save people like us from the death that our sins bring. Our greed, our self-centeredness—these things bring God's condemnation down on us. But Jesus came to release us from them, to forgive all our sins, to give us a new life, a real life with God.

And Jesus came to open our eyes to the way things really are:

- He opens our eyes to the fact that *wealth doesn't last, but some things do*. God lasts. God's forgiving grace last. The new life that God gives us lasts.
- Jesus opens our eyes to the fact that *this life isn't all there is; there's more*. The material possessions we have on this earth are good gifts of God. But they are not the things that make up our life. No, God gives us life—physical life and eternal life in Jesus Christ.
- Jesus opens our eyes to the fact that *God is in control, of life and death and everything else*. He also opens our eyes to the fact that God is gracious. God loves us enough to call us away from the idolatry of greed, which will lead us where it led the rich man in the parable: away from God and all his goodness forever. God loves us enough to give us free of charge those things that do last forever, and inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you (cf. 1 Peter 1).

Now what? Now that God has given us a new life that money could never buy, now what when it comes to our material possessions, our "stuff"?

- Now we give attention to what lasts beyond this earthly life. Our baptism, our faith, the Word of God, our Lord's Supper—these things are not just quaint church rites with no real value. These things are the ways in which God gives us new and eternal life. These things of God are more valuable than anything else in the world.
- Now we use God's gifts wisely. We recognize that all we have comes as a gift from his gracious hand. This doesn't mean that we never spend anything on ourselves; God gives us his gifts for our enjoyment. But we also consider the other uses God has in mind for the resources he has given. We care for our families and others in need. We support our government. We plan for our future, recognizing that God will determine what happens to us there. We help to spread the message of God's grace around the world.
- Instead of how much stuff we have determining whether we're happy or not, God's neverending love determines that. Now we find our contentment in God and his priceless love. In all things, we realize that in Jesus we already have real and lasting wealth.

So, is greed, as Gordon Gekko asserted, good?

To desire things is not in itself bad. To want financial security in the future and to plan wisely to get it—that's good management, as long as we remember the things that the rich man forgot. And for an Olympic athlete to want to excel and to work hard to do so—that's not bad, as long as they remember the things about success that the rich man forgot. Last week I heard an interview with Laura Wilkinson, who won a gold medal in the 10M platform diving competition at the last Olympics. She's competing again this year, and she said that she wants to win. But, interestingly, she also said that there's more to life than just this event. She came to realize that Olympic glory doesn't last, but that other things do.

Greed or God? We'll side with Jesus on this question. To desire something and to work for it—this is good as long as we remember what lasts and who's in control: God and his grace. Greed is actually not good, not at all. It takes over. It destroys lives, both now and in eternity.

Greed is not good. But God is. To twist Michael Douglas's words, we could say it this way: "The fact is, ladies and gentleman, is that *God* is good. *God* is right. *God* works. And God, not greed, is the only hope for mankind." Amen.