

What would you do for \$10 million? That was the question asked of 1000 people at a motivational seminar. Among the choices given were these (and the corresponding % who agreed:

Give up your faith 26% Leave your family 21% Become a prostitute for a week 23% Leave your spouse 15% Are you surprised? How would you have answered that? Really, those questions are designed to see how greedy you are.

Today's reading them, is about greed. How would you define greed? Someone designed it as 'the desire to have more no matter how much you already have'. About greed, Jesus says, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;" Or as the King James Version has it, "Beware of covetousness."

How many Commandments are there about greed, also known as covetousness? Two! #s 9 and 10: 'You shalt not covet your neighbors wife, workers, or things.' Someone has defined covetousness as "wanting more of what you already have enough of." Wanting more of what you already have enough of. Most of us would not call ourselves greedy, but wanting more of what we already have enough of? Hmm. Sounds almost too close for comfort. Is there anyone here who is immune to that temptation? Are we satisfied with what we have? Do we envy others who have more/better/bigger than what we do? Has that desire to be the best/wealthiest/most famous lived in your heart for minutes or months or more? Those doggone Joneses just never quit! How do they expect us to keep up with them? Who of us can say we have kept the 9th or 10th commandments? Not one!

Now there is something about covetousness that makes it a particularly dangerous sin. It is a sin that nobody notices! You can commit this sin twenty-four hours a day and nobody would ever know it but you and God. I could be coveting something that belongs to you right now (like Duley's shirt) and you would never know it. The lady sitting next to you could be coveting the shoes that you wear. But you would never know that.

But not only do others not notice it; we don't even notice it. If there is one sin that doesn't seem to really bother any of us it is the sin of covetousness. The story is told of a priest who, after listening to many confessions over the years, said, I have listened to thousands of confessions and I have yet to hear one person confess to the sin of covetousness." Compare that with what Jesus said: 'You see, life is not found in possessions'; life is found in a person and his name is Jesus.

Now, to understand the story, you need to know Israelite inheritance laws. In Jewish law, the oldest son received half of the inheritance with the rest of the boys getting an even split of what was left. In this case, there were only two boys. So when papa died, the oldest received 66% while little brother received 34%. And Jesus, always the champion of the underdog, would seem to him to be the referee who would level that playing field by re-distributing the wealth.

Do you remember a book written about 7-8 years ago that was titled 'Who Stole My Cheese'? The theme of the book is that cheese is whatever is important to you. When we don't get what we want, we feel cheated, like someone stole our cheese.

So, when we have difficulties, we wonder who—maybe even God—stole our cheese, that is, has been unfair to us. And little brother felt like his cheese was being stolen. Someone—his brother no less-- stole his cheese. So, someone had to do something. Jesus, he thought, do something.

Instead of doing what the young man wanted, Jesus told him and all of us to 'Be very Careful. Greed wants to have you.' To further illustrate his point, Jesus told a parable about a rich young man. The rich farmer in the parable made wise business decisions. He saw the crops that came in with abundance. He asked himself, "What shall I do to store all my crops?" What's the problem with that? He decided to build bigger and better barns. So, what's the problem?

Please be careful here. Do not make the man worse than he is. He is not unlike most of us in his motives. The message of the parable is certainly not that God doesn't like people who work hard and find success. Rather, those possessions (or the pursuit of them) can become so consuming as to be fatal. The Greek rendering is more explicit than the English – V. 20: "This night they (possessions) will require your soul from you." Those possessions can be dangerous...even deadly. BE CAREFUL!

Let me give you an example. Near my Dad & Mom's church a widower lived on a busy corner of 1 ½ acre. When he died, his daughter gave the contents of the yard and the house to the church—if they could/would haul it all away so she didn't have to. He was a hoarder. Now some hoarders have a mental issue here, but that was not the case of this man. On his acre & a half he had 71 cars in various states; 14 tractors and farm implements and a crane. And that didn't count the house where things were packed in; nearly all having some value. Do you think greed possessed him? He and the rich man were kindred spirits.

The problem with the rich man was that nowhere do you read about him giving thanks to God for his huge harvest. He did not give any credit whatsoever to the Lord. To his own soul, the man said, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." That's the problem. He embraced the voice of greed and ignored the voice of God. The day was coming when he would die and have to face God. That day was coming sooner than he thought, but like a lot of folks, he lived as if he'd never die. Like him, we are caught between the voices of good and evil. He chose to ignore God and leave his love for God behind.

When we seek possessions as the ultimate goal of life, possessions turn around and possess us. Shortly after Jesus told the parable about the foolish farmer, he spoke about the dangers of worrying about the things of this earth, but forgetting about the higher priority of heaven. He said: *Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you — you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek first his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.* Lk 12:27-31

The foolishness of setting the wrong priorities can lead to eternal death. Setting the right priorities leads to eternal life. Whatever gets our attention gets us. If we focus on our problems and glance at God, our problems get us. But if we focus on God and glance at our problems and the need for possessions, God gets us. It's a matter of setting the right priorities. That's what Jesus means by striving for the kingdom. Accepting God's reign over us in love is the highest priority we have.

Greed and possessions can blind us to the coming of God. When we are focused on something other than God, God may not be seen. That's why the first lesson from Ecclesiastes says, "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Possessions can only temporarily fill the void in our hearts which God alone is intended to fill. Possessions can be attractive distractions.

That's why the 2nd lesson for today says, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth". Setting our minds on the things of the earth eventually, if not immediately, disappoints. After all, we can't take possessions with us when we die. As a creed, greed is seriously flawed. That's why Jesus said to the young man who wanted him to judge in his favor and fill his heart with possessions, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." We can try to fill the void in our lives by seeking success, but, in truth, only God can fill that void. All substitutes fall short, when God calls our number. There are no pockets in a shroud; hearses need no trailer hitches.

Now we begin to see why our rich friend was called such a nasty name. Obviously, he was inordinately preoccupied with those potentially deadly possessions. Until the voice of God interrupts, all we hear about is Stuff - his "land...crops...barns...grain...ample goods." He sounds as if he comes from the school of thought that is convinced that the one who dies with the most toys wins. Is he right? I don't think so. Do you remember seeing (or hearing about) that wonderful program on Public Television last year called Affluenza? The program noted that Americans are spending more, but enjoying it less, and there is a consensus out there that, as a society, we are too greedy, too materialistic. And there are too many miserable millionaires to be ignored. Stuff! Just like the fellow in the parable.

But he has more of a problem than an accumulation of stuff. He has come to believe that the stuff is his security. Wrong, Fool! Even without the problem of an untimely demise, this never works. Ask anyone who has ever been robbed...or had their house burn up in the Florida brushfires...or seen a home slide slowly, slowly over a rain-soaked California cliff. We come from a society that encourages greed in all of us. Why else would people stand for hours in long lines this past week to buy Powerball tickets that offered only an 80-million-to-one chance of winning? (And how many of those would be standing in line today to get into church?) We all suffer from "Affluenza." We know.

I pray that you will be rich toward God. For us to accumulate earthly treasures and never be generous toward God, would be the height of foolishness. Do you remember the commercial where a guy takes his Dad to a baseball game? Tickets, \$80. Beer, hot dogs and pretzels, \$44. Spending time with your dad, Priceless! Knowing Jesus, like the commercial says, is beyond PRICELESS.