

## When Less is More: Less Greed-More God

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Luke 12:13-21

*Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."*

Luke 12:13-21 (NRSV)

I want to begin by posing a problem to you – a scenario. Let's say you have a Lego sculpture. You're building a Lego sculpture. You know what that is. This one is two towers that are connected by a bridge. The problem is that it's not finished because one tower has six Legos on the tower and the other only has three. It's mismatched and it's leaning over sideways. And there are extra Legos lying around. And I say to you – "Fix this problem!" Ninety percent of you will fix it this way; you'll take three Legos that are laying around and you'll add them to the short tower so that you have two towers of six Legos with a bridge in between. Ninety percent. Only ten percent of the people will take three Legos off of the tall one so that they're even that way. Only ten percent. Even if we say to them in the experiment. Even if we say to them, "You can subtract as well as add." They still add the three. Because we're prone to be people who add.

This comes from a book called *Subtract* which talks about the things we could subtract from our lives and make a difference. We so often want to keep adding stuff. At the church, we're sometimes prone to say, "Do more! Do more!" Always add. Like God is looking down on us saying, "Oh, I'm so proud of them – they're so busy."

For the next few weeks, we're going to be talking about some things you might want to take out of your life for a particular purpose. And that's to make room for other things that matter more.

*Join me in prayer: O God, open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear and open our hearts that we might feel. Then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I want to make a confession to you as we think about this Scripture today. I'd appreciate it if we can just keep this between us. Don't want it out there – just in the family. The week before last I bought a lottery ticket. Now Methodist pastors aren't supposed to be gamblers, but it was \$1.3 billion. And here's why I bought the ticket. I have this blue blazer I keep in my office closet and anytime I need a coat I'll get it out and put it on. I got the coat out and I reached in the pocket and there was \$2 – just \$2. That's a sign from God that that's exactly how much a lottery ticket costs. I thought to myself, "God is telling me something. God's saying, 'I want to bless you with a win. You only have to do your part. And that's to go buy a ticket. I can't do that for you. You have to go buy the ticket.'" Here's the funny thing, I knew I wasn't going to win. Come on, but here's what happens when you buy a lottery ticket. You start to think. What would I do with \$1.3 billion? I thought about all the causes I'd support and about all the people I could bless. I could start a foundation. I'd be sure to restrain my spending. First, I'd have to decide if I was going to tell my wife about it or not. I'd have to decide that. I felt pretty confident that I could restrain my spending, but I'm not sure beyond that. She's going to get me for that I know! It's going to be bad!

If I ever leave St. Luke's she's going to take a shot – I know it!

But what happens is it begins to dominate your thinking. And you begin to think, "Oh, if I just had it...!"

I want to look at this Scripture and examine four phrases in it. The first one is where it says, "All kinds of greed." It's in verse 15: "Take care, be on your guard against all kinds of greed." The Greek word there *pleonexia* is the word for all kinds of greed – that's one word and it's

translated *all kinds of greed*. It comes from the word that means more or numerically more and to have. To have more. All kinds of greed aren't just for money and possessions. All kinds of greed are for all those things that you want. Maybe, "I want more recognition. I want more appreciation. I want more power. I want to win – at all costs. I want to be a scratch golfer. I want to be the best possible golfer I can be." Anytime something begins to push other things out of our life in such a way that that want is what's driving you that's what this word is about. This wanting.

We're like sophisticated toddlers who have been taken to the grocery store. Did you ever take a toddler to the grocery store? They're always saying, "I want that! I want that! I want that!" You have to put them in the cart in the middle of the aisle, so they won't grab things off the shelves as you're going through. We're just really more sophisticated and we think to ourselves, "I want... I want...I want a new house...I want a new car... I want new furniture" Or "I want to be married... I want to have children...I want a new job...I want to live someplace else."

It's not just about possessions. It's about this desire that can begin to take us over. All kinds of greed.

The second phrase I like is tied to the first one where he says, "And then he said to them, take care, be on your guard against all kinds of greed." What he's saying is it's sneaky. It's sneaky.

I grew up reading J.R. Tolkien's book series *The Lord of the Rings* and some of you may have read it. *The Hobbit* was the first one and in there, there's a character named Gollum. He was a Hobbit who got a taste of this ring of power and once he got it it began to take him over and possess him. He ended up being this little slimy creature who couldn't stand the light. He'd talk about the ring as "My precious" – he'd say, "It's my precious!" It just owned him – and changed him. Our desires can do that.

Or maybe you've read the Harry Potter books or seen the movies. There's a mirror called The Mirror of Erised which is *desire* spelled backward. When you look in the mirror you can see your heart's desire. When Harry looks into the mirror, he sees his parents. And Dumbledore, sort of the wizard or professor, says, "Everyone else sees great wealth or immortality but you – your heart's desire is love."

Then Dumbledore says: “Men have wasted away before the mirror, entranced by what they have seen or being driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.” Driven mad by desire.

I have a friend named Lawrence Young who’s a pastor at Klein United Methodist Church and he grew up worshipping in the black worship tradition. One of the songs they sing is called “Don’t Let the Devil Ride.” Do you know that song? I’d never heard it- but it’s a great song. “Don’t let the devil ride, don’t let the devil ride...If you let him ride, he’s going to want to drive... so don’t let the devil ride...” It’s going to take you over.

That’s why this is such a problem. Because the desires that we’re given are natural. They’re God-given desires. Desire to have enough food, to have security, to be loved, to be important. The desire to have some significance, to have agency. All those things that can begin to take us over. You can’t do away with them. We don’t want to do away with them. That’s not the point. So, Jesus is not calling us to be ascetics. Asceticism says, “I’m going to shun all worldly pleasures. Anything that’s self-indulgent.” The monks who’d go off into the desert are ascetics – they shun all worldly pleasures. Jesus is calling perhaps some people to do that, but for most of us, the problem is that we have these natural God-given desires, but they begin to take us over. They begin to run rampant. So that’s why Jesus says, “Be on your guard against it.” Be very careful of those desires that just begin to own you.

So, let’s look at specifically what he’s talking about in this passage. Here he’s talking about possessions – our money. Here’s what he says, and I love this phrase: “And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” You’re going to die and these things that you’ve prepared...

My mother passed away a few years ago and before she died, we moved her into an assisted living place. And as we did that, we had to clean out her house. You may have been through this. My mother’s a wonderful lady with great priorities, but she’d say, “This dish is a beautiful dish and it’s valuable. We got it in Germany. Surely you or one of the girls want this dish, don’t you?” I’d have to say, “Not really, Mom.” She’d say: “I don’t know what we’re going to do with it.” Then she’d say, “This couch is valuable – a really good piece of furniture. Surely you or one of the girls would want this couch.” We’d say, “Mom, we all have couches.”

Between services, someone told me that you just need to say, “Yeah, I’ll take it...” You don’t want to hurt their feelings. But the point is that we reach a certain point in our lives when... I could see the sadness in her face, and it was as if she were saying, “I spent my whole life

having these things and caring for them, now what?” Because you can’t take it with you. That’s the thing. Let me flip it around. We’re coming up on five years since Hurricane Harvey and there was a family in the church whose house was flooded. They moved all their stuff upstairs. Then they found out that ultimately, they had to tear down their house and build a whole new house with a higher foundation. So, they put all their stuff in storage and moved into an apartment. It took a year and a half to build the house. Then once their house was done, they wondered, “Do we have to get all that stuff back out again? We’ve been fine without it. Our lives have been simpler.” So, they left their stuff in storage for another year while they grappled with what they were going to do.

Jesus kind of makes a double claim here about why we need to be careful of it. The first one is that he says, “You can’t take it with you.” The Scripture reads, “Fool, tonight thy life may be required of you.”

My predecessor Dr. Jim Moore, the master of all book and sermon titles, wrote one called “*I Never Saw a Hearse Pulling a U-Haul.*” That says it all! You can’t take it with you.

Stephen King is a writer of horror novels and he’s made millions of dollars on his books. One day he had a single car accident out on a country road. And he said that he woke up in a ditch after being unconscious and he had his tibia sticking through his jeans. He’s a writer of course, and he said it was like “Like a branch broken off a tree.” He was laying there in the blood and the mud and thinking that he was going to die. Then he said it occurred to him at that moment that all his books and his millions were of absolutely no value. He writes this: “We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out but we’re just as broke. Warren Buffet is going to go out broke. Bill Gates is going out broke. Tom Hanks going out broke. Steve King – broke. All the money you earn, all the stocks you buy, all the mutual funds you trade – all of that is mostly smoke and mirrors. It’s still going to be a quarter past getting late whether you tell the time on a Timex or a Rolex. I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan anyway. All that lasts is what you pass on.”

You can’t take it with you so you might as well give it away.

The second claim he makes is that you want to be careful about these desires because they will end up filling up your life. They’ll take it all over completely.

Listen to the phrase and this is one that struck me: “I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones. I will do this....” He’s saying, “I’ve had this bumper crop and now I can build a bigger barn, tear down my other one.” We spend our lives tearing down and building barns. Taking care of the stuff we have. And it begins to possess us. Begins to own us.

The movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” is a classic. In it, George Bailey is sort of the main character but his father Peter Bailey – called “Pa Bailey...” If you remember the story, he started the Savings and Loan in Bedford Falls and he did it so he could provide loans to people who could buy and build affordable houses. But when times got hard, he didn’t want to try and collect from them, so he gave them lots of grace. He wouldn’t foreclose on them. So, the savings and loan had trouble staying afloat. Then one day he had a stroke and he died, pretty much broke himself. So, George Bailey is walking through his office, and he sees a picture of his dad there – Pa Bailey. Then just below it is a frame. And on the frame was his father’s motto, “All you can take with you is that which you’ve given away.”

The stuff that owns you - you can’t take that.

This whole sermon series really came from a book by a guy named Josh Becker. Here’s his story: he was a youth pastor and one day he was cleaning out his garage. And the neighbor across the street came over and said, “Might do you good to get rid of a lot of this junk.” And Becker thought, “That’s right.” And it really began to weigh on him. So, he talked to his wife, and they decided that they were going to try to simplify their lives. Sort of clean out and clean up. Allow a little more space. It wasn’t like a drastic single moment where they threw everything away, it began to be a principle that they applied to their lives as they wanted to simplify. They’d ask, “How can we make room for things?”

Here’s the basic theme. He says, “Our excessive possessions are not making us happy. Even worse, they are taking us away from the things that do. Once we let go of the things that don’t matter, we are free to pursue all the things that really do matter.” (Joshua Becker *The More of Less*).

It leads me to the last phrase. “But are not rich toward God... so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” You see, the point isn’t that you need to get rid of all your stuff so you can live a more spartan life. So, your life can be emptier. Not at all! Jesus said, “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.” The idea is that we

remove our desire for all these other things so we can be filled up with the presence of God. That we can fill our lives with the things that matter.

Tricia Mayer lives in Seattle and she's a senior executive for Microsoft. Seattle is a secular city, and it has a little of the vibe of Silicon Valley. It's kind of a city where wealth matters a lot. She's also a committed follower of Jesus and here's what she writes: "It is also hard to see the shackles of wealth choke the life out of people. Which happens a lot around here. Ephesians 3:14-19 is my favorite on the subject of wealth. Being loved by God and knowing Him is to have riches beyond measure. Having all the money you need on this earth is merely having another full-time job. There is no comparison." (Tricia Mayer, Senior Microsoft Executive).

Here's what Ephesians 3:14-19 says: "For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

No, God does not intend for us to have empty lives. We don't push away or let go of possessions so that we'll live these empty lives. We do that so that our lives may be filled with God. So that we can make some space.

I pray that you would know the God who came that you might have life and have it abundantly, that you might be filled with all the fullness of God. That's wealth.

*Gracious and loving God. We confess that sometimes our desires take us over. We want... we want...we want. Oh, God, by your power, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray that you would give us the courage and discipline to let go of things that don't matter so that our lives might be one long gift to others. So that we might be filled with all the fullness of God. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*