

The Folly of Greed

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 9th of November 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled The Folly of Greed and is based on Luke chapter 12 verses 13 to 21.

In Old Testament, New Testament by Jesus very often and by some of his followers and the writers in the Old Testament as well. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Everything they needed all laid on.

Beautiful place. Created by God. Perfect for them. But they want more. They want to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree as well as all the fruit from the other trees.

Ancient Israel. Leaving slavery in Egypt to go to a promised land where everything is on tap for them. The promised land where there will be abundant crops and animals and children and rain and sun in their seasons and natural mineral deposits coming out of the mountains.

[1 : 0 4] And on their way there through the wilderness they grumble and want more and complain about what they've got. No wonder then that in that wilderness period in the Ten Commandments the last of them is you shall not covet.

Or there's the person who comes to Jesus and asks for his share of the inheritance. Someone in the crowd said to Jesus teacher tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.

We're not told whether it is a legitimate request or an illegitimate one. That is we're not told whether rightly a share of the inheritance belonged to this man or not.

And Jesus declines to arbitrate. He says to the man friend who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you. If it's an illegitimate request it is clearly a case of greed.

Here is a man whose brother has received an inheritance that rightly belongs to the brother and this man is greedy to have some of what is not his. But even if it is a legitimate request that is that somehow this man is owed some of the inheritance and for some reason his brother has got it all or kept or claimed it all there is a sense in which his request is for justice but no doubt with the motive of greed or covetousness as well.

[2 : 3 4] You see so often we cloak our motives of greed and covetousness with the language of rights or justice so the workers who go out on strike and wave their placards around demanding their rights or justice for pay conditions or work conditions or whatever are also motivated by greed.

That is you don't see workers out complaining that they've got it too good. It's always wanting to get more. And in our society which is becoming increasingly litigious so that people are suing others when they miss out on something claiming their so-called rights or justice are again motivated as well by greed or covetousness.

And the same could be said for this man desiring his share of the inheritance even if it is a legitimate request. The other way that we cloak our expressions of greed or covetousness is by calling it our needs.

In fact we don't have to do that because the advertisements do it for us all too often. They tell us this latest gadget is what you need. This new outfit is what you need. This latest CD is what you need.

This is a must-have book or car or holiday or whatever as though somehow we need it we really must have it. But in the end it's fuelling our greed and our covetousness.

[4 : 0 6] Well Jesus deals now with this issue that this man has raised but not by addressing him alone but by addressing the crowd who are around him because this is an issue that pertains not just to the man wanting his share of the inheritance but in fact pertains to every person in the crowd.

The man may be dealing with an issue of inheritance but each person in the crowd is struggling with issues of greed or covetousness. And Jesus then says to them the crowd take heed be on your guard.

Now they are very strong words. Jesus is not just offering them some helpful advice. You may find it helpful if you did this, this or this. He's saying this is a serious urgent warning.

Take heed be on your guard. That is Jesus is alerting the crowd to a real danger. If you go swimming at St Kilda Beach and someone says to you beware of the crocodiles while you're swimming there, they're stupid.

There's no real danger of crocodiles. But if you're swimming in the Daintree River in northern Queensland and somebody says to you beware of the crocodiles they're probably not going to say to you casually. That is, it is a real risk and danger if you're swimming in the Daintree River in northern Queensland for crocodiles.

[5 : 3 1] So Jesus' words here reflect that urgency, the reality and seriousness of the danger that the crowd are facing. Covetousness is dangerous and the crowd needs to take heed be on guard literally to ward off a foe is the idea behind it.

They are under attack, each one of them from the enemy of greed or covetousness. Whether we're wealthy or poor, young or old, new Christians or not Christians, covetousness is a real danger that we face and the reason for that is that the human heart is prone to greed and covetousness.

Whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, whatever our upbringing, our nurture, our nature, we are greedy and covetous in our hearts and so covetousness is a real and serious danger and spiritually, if it's not fought, can be a danger that leads us far from God.

One of my heroes in church history is a man by the name of Hugh Latimer. Latimer, at the end of his career, was the Bishop of Worcester, a town in England. He was one of the reformers, that is, when the Church of England was formed, breaking away from the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church in Rome.

And in Lent, the period before Easter in 1550, so about 450 years ago, Bishop Latimer had the task of preaching the Lenten sermons to the King of England, Edward VI, son of Henry VIII.

[7 : 1 9] And he began one of those sermons to the King and it seems not to a great congregation in Westminster Abbey in which the King was in a royal box or something, just to the King and maybe a few of his courtiers or officials around him, but largely one-to-one to the King.

And he began by saying to him in no uncertain terms, covetousness, take heed and beware and if I should say nothing else for three to four hours, for that was how long people often preach there, take note, covetousness is the essence of rebellion.

He knew that even the King of England who had so much wealth, so much power, so much influence needed to heed the warning of greed or covetousness.

It is not easy to avoid this sin. I covet and without wishing to totally deflate and destroy your view of me, some people left this morning saying we had thought that you were perfect and now we know you're not.

I covet. I covet other people's houses, I covet their families, I covet their jobs, I covet their working hours, I covet their weekends, I covet their cars, I covet their power, I covet some people's physiques, others' good looks, I covet their popularity, their sociability, I covet their sporting prowess, I also covet some people's eloquence, their knowledge, their intellect, their preaching ability, their self-discipline, even their godliness.

[9 : 11] It's all covetousness, even if its object is a good thing. It's all greed. And Jesus, in this warning in verse 15, has said to this crowd, take care, be on your guard against all kinds of greed.

greed. It's not just greed for filthy lucre, for money, for coins or cash. It's greed for all sorts of things. Whether it's telecom bonds or Allen bonds, expensive homes or homes are caught, investment in rubles, rupees or Rupert Murdoch's, whether it's Tats Lotto or Santa's Grotto, covetousness faces us all the time.

For all of us. It's why so many people have fallen for those stupid Nigerian email scams that promise you millions and millions of dollars. It's why gambling is such a problem in our society, even the so-called innocent flutter last Tuesday.

And it's why one of the best-selling books in Melbourne at the moment is entitled Nought to 130 Properties in 3.5 Years. Jesus goes on to teach a parable to illustrate the seriousness of greed and covetousness.

The end of verse 15 when he's warned them to be on guard against all kinds of greed, he says, the reason is that one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. And then he tells them this famous parable.

[10 : 38] 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? And then he said, I'll do this.

I'll pull down my barns and build larger ones. And there I'll store all my grain and my goods. Now what's wrong with that?

He's a man blessed of God, enjoying the blessing of abundant crops promised in the Old Testament perhaps, prudently thinking about how to be careful with the blessing that he's received, planning wisely for the future.

What's wrong? Well, Jesus doesn't condemn the prosperity that he has or that it may be in fact a sign of God's blessing. He doesn't condemn the careful planning, the shrewdness or prudence of his building bigger barns.

But what this parable is against and what Jesus does condemn is greed and covetousness. Jesus has no time for the gobbling greed for gain.

[11 : 46] He condemns the arrogance of wealth and greed. You see how this man is described here in words that we've probably glossed over and missed. He says, they are my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods.

I will do this. I'll pull down these small barns. I will build the bigger ones. I will say to myself, I, I, I. It's very egotistical. This is a man who thinks that he's made it and that he is in control.

Verse 19 goes on to describe what he says to himself. Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry.

But he is where we long to be. Eat, drink, merry, be merry, relax, rest, enjoy life, soak up la dolce vita, the good life.

See, he's got his form of superannuation coming in, his life assurance, his investment portfolio in his bigger barns, his house paid for presumably and so on. He's safe, he's secure, he's satisfied, he's achieved the great Aussie dream, as well as probably the ancient Israelite one.

[13 : 00] He might well be listed in an early equivalent of BRW's, 100 wealthiest people, another list that I covered. But our world would say to a man like this, well done, you've made it.

Although to be honest our world would probably then mutter under our breath, I wish it was me. You see, this man is where people in Australia are striving to be. For those of you younger than me, this may well be where your contemporaries at school or uni or you yourselves are looking forward to be in 30 years time.

It's where some of my contemporaries from school and university are well on the way to being, if not already almost arrived. It's where plenty of people in Australia in their 50s are hoping that in the next few years they might get their early retirement, nice house up in Queensland on the coast, country cottage up in the hills, everything secure, bigger and bigger barn, safe, secure, the future's mapped out.

Eat, drink, be merry, rest, relax. You've done it, you've made it, well done, our world will say. It's not what God says. What God says in verse 20 is, fool.

Our world says well done and God says fool, poles apart. You see the greedy man thought he was in control but he's not because God's word comes in and intervenes in his life and throws it into turmoil.

[14 : 19] God's word comes in and wipes that smug grin off his face very quickly. This man won't even benefit from all his labour and his crop filled large barns because God's demanded his life that night.

You see this is a man who through greed and covetousness has lived as though there's no final judgment or judge before whom you give account. And God says you're a fool.

This is a man who through his greed and covetousness has lost sight of the fact that death could happen at any time. He thinks it's miles away, well into his 80s or 90s, in that distant part way down the track.

But God says you're a fool. This is a man who has lived as though there's no God, that he's God. And the real God says to him you're a fool. See this is a man who by his actions has shown that in his heart he says there is no God.

And God says like the psalmist said you're a fool. And this man has lost his soul. Because God says to him in verse 20 that this very night your soul or life is being demanded of you.

[15 : 29] And what does it profit this man if he's gained the whole world even. But now forfeited his soul. He's a fool. Don't be fooled by your covetous heart.

Don't be fooled by your greedy mind. It is not worth the risk. That's why Jesus' warning in verse 15 was so urgent and so desperate.

Take heed. Be on guard. Take efforts not to be greedy or covetous. And the reasons why it's so dangerous are firstly it represents a deficient view of God.

God is one who promises to give us all that we need. His grace is sufficient for us daily. But those who are greedy and covetous are saying God's not like that.

He's stingy. He's mean. There's more that I need and want and desire. And so that deficient view of God fractures a relationship with God and demonstrates a very poor understanding of the grace of God as well.

[16 : 32] And secondly, greed and covetousness deny God's final judgment because the greedy, covetous person is saying this is what matters. My barn's here.

My car's in the garage here. My wealth in my pockets or in my credit cards. This is what matters. This is the ultimate reality and so it's a denial of final judgment and a denial of eternity.

And in the end, you see, greed and covetousness says there is no God. It denies God in the end altogether because greed and covetousness are propelling us down the path of self sufficiency, of self-satisfaction and self-control.

And that's as far from God as you can go. Jesus says at the end of this parable, so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.

Not a condemnation of those who are wealthy but those who store up treasures for themselves. selfish, greedy, covetous people.

[17 : 53] Later on in this very chapter, he'll say that rather than storing up treasures for yourselves on earth, you ought to store up treasure in heaven. That's what's being rich with God or rich towards God as the end of verse 21 says.

Storing up treasure in heaven. Investing in God's realities and God's priorities and investing in God's purposes rather than selfishly. It also means taking care to be generous and looking after other people.

If you look across to verse 33, Jesus' advice to another person was sell your possessions and give arms, make purses for your souls that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near and no moth destroys for where your treasure is there your heart will be also.

And the greedy, covetous person has clearly placed their heart in earthly treasure. Jay Gatsby threw extravagant parties.

In his Long Island mansion in New York, all sorts of people would come to these lavish parties that Jay Gatsby would throw to enjoy the luxury of his mansion, the beautiful grounds around them, the swimming pool that was there.

[19 : 09] This was the place to be. The highlight of the social life. And during one of these parties, a man had become drunk on the overflow of wine or champagne or whatever was served at this party.

And drunk, he stumbled into the library of Jay Gatsby in his mansion. And he looked around the book-lined walls of the library of Jay Gatsby and he pulled out a book and he said, they're real.

They're absolutely real. They have pages and everything. I would have thought it would just be durable cardboard.

And he's astonished at the opulence, affluence and wealth of Jay Gatsby that he's even got real books lining his library walls. And later on, the owner, Jay Gatsby, was trying to impress Daisy.

And he took her into the room where he kept his shirts. They were stacked like bricks, a dozen high in this room.

[20 : 22] And Gatsby, in order to impress her, starts taking out the shirts and throwing them down on the table. Shirt after shirt, a huge pile of shirts, dozens and dozens of shirts being thrown on this table in front of Daisy's eyes.

The best shirts that money can buy. And Daisy then puts her head onto the shirts and starts sobbing. They're such beautiful shirts, she sobs.

It makes me sad because I've never seen such beautiful shirts before. Here is a man who had more books that he could ever read or use.

More shirts that he could ever wear. Showing off his covetousness, his greed, his wealth. In order to impress the social set and in order in particular to impress Daisy.

J. Gatsby, the great Gatsby, the hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous novel, was killed in his prime in that novel.

[21 : 38] And though it's not a Christian novel, far from it. There's a sense in which he's a modern day parallel of the man that Jesus spoke about in the parable that we've just looked at. His soul demanded by God, although it was a violent death.

What a fool. So greedy, so covetous to show off in front of these people. And what did he benefit from it?

He lost his soul. Whether we're rich like Gatsby, though I doubt we are, or the rich man that Jesus spoke about in the parable, or whether we're just like the man who asked for his share of the inheritance, whether we're powerful like Edward VI, or whether we're just normal everyday Australians, we need to heed the warning here.

Take care. Be on your guard from all kinds of greed or covetousness.

Rather than storing up treasures for yourself on earth, **ERULTY** be rich towards God. For single ■ music is is Thank you.