

Modern Day Idols: Money
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
February 28, 2021-AM Service
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Luke 12:13-21

So because this is so important, I'll say it right up front. It's not about the money. It's not about the money in this parable or in life. Let's start with the parable.

In our text this morning, as I said, Jesus isn't warning against money, or wealth, or material abundance. Jesus warns against greed. Jesus warns against the insatiable feeling of never having enough - of always desiring more. And the parable Jesus tells illustrates that. The farmer, Jesus says, has had a great harvest. His land has produced a whole lot of grain. There's a huge abundance. And that in itself is not a bad thing at all. The farmer's problem isn't the great harvest, or that he wants to plan for the future, or even that the farmer is rich.

The problem with the farmer is what happens to his vision. The commentator David Lose helped me see something I hadn't seen before in the text. The farmer's problem is that his good fortune has distorted his vision, so that everything he sees starts and ends with himself. Listen again to the conversation he has, not with a spouse, or friend, or parent, or neighbor, but only with himself. "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 myself, or better, my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry."

Do you see what's happening there? It is an absolutely egocentric conversation, even including a conversation with himself inside the conversation he is already having with himself. This is why he is a fool. He has fallen prey to the idea that life, and particularly the good life, consists of himself and the things he possesses, imagining they belong to him. And that is exactly what Jesus is warning against.

As you know, during Lent we are taking a look at the false idols we direct our attention to, the things to which we look for our security and significance and meaning in life. Again, there is nothing inherently evil or bad about money or possessions. Money can do lots of wonderful things. It can provide for you and your family. It can be given to others in need and promote the welfare of society.

Money and possessions become an idol when they take the shape of greed. And here's the hard thing. Greed is exceedingly difficult to discern in oneself. Tim Keller says that when greed takes hold of your heart - it blinds you. Nobody thinks they are greedy. You know, pastors sometimes hear folks confess to private sins in their lives. You can imagine the kinds of sins those would be - adultery, addiction, lying, cheating etc. But greed is not one of them - because we almost never see it in ourselves.

Here's something else to be aware of - each of us has a need that is beneath the greed - a need that feeds the greed. Two of the most common ones are; first - control (believing we're in charge of our destiny) feeds the greed, and, second - wanting the approval of others feeds the greed.

Here's an observation from my own life. Since the Pandemic started, I find myself checking my financial apps more frequently. Why? Well, perhaps it feeds the illusion that my future security has to do with the numbers in those accounts. And why do I feel the need to keep checking the mirror to make sure that new jacket is adequately covering the bulges I don't want others to see? Well, perhaps it's because it feeds the illusion that if I have the approval of others

- I'm more worthy and am a little closer to the good life, a life our society constantly, relentlessly, inescapably sells us.

Tim Keller tells a helpful story to get at the need beneath the greed and how it enslaves and distorts lives. He recalls the time when a pastor friend was counseling a couple having severe conflicts over how they handled money. The wife considered the husband a cruel and uncompromising miser. One day the pastor was speaking one-on-one to the husband who was complaining bitterly about his spouse. "She is so selfish spending so much on her clothes and appearance." The husband could see clearly how her need to look attractive to others influenced her use of money. The pastor then turned the script and said, "Do you see that by not spending or giving away anything, by socking away every penny, you are being just a selfish? You are "spending" absolutely everything on your need to feel secure, protected and in control."

You see, greed, like other idols, is a severe task master. It exacts from us an enormous amount of time and energy and worry and anxiety as we try hard to secure our own lives in various ways. And for all the time and energy and worry and anxiety that we spend - nothing can change the trajectory of our life. As a friend said recently - no amount of money can take away the anxiety of eventually losing control of our bodily functions. I'll add - or our bigger barns.

You know - I think that most of us know and believe that what Jesus says is true. We know that money can't buy happiness. And yet - even though we know this - we struggle to live that way. So what can we do about this. How do we address the need and the greed in us?

Well, if our problem in the first place, like the farmers, is our vision, if our problem is a distorted way of seeing - then the solution is seeing more clearly. The solution involves creating a clearer picture for ourselves. It involves a re-orientation to the reality of where our security lies.

Here's the first thing to help us see a clearer picture. Let's remember that Jesus already knows all about us. Jesus knows both our deep human need for security AND our tendencies to try to find it in all the wrong places. And so what's helpful in our reorientation is recalling that Jesus came for just that reason. Jesus came to tell us and to show us that God wants so much more for us than simply more stuff. Our security comes not from what a bigger barn can hold but what God can do with hands held open.

As the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor proposes that there's a catch to receiving the joy and security that comes as a gift of God. "The catch is," she says, "you have got to be ready to receive the gift. You cannot accept God's gift without free hands to take it with."

The reason Jesus warns us against greed isn't to curb our joy, but to invite us into a more abundant life with the God who loves us. And Jesus keeps declaring that message all the way to the cross - so that we will see and know just how far God will go to secure our lives in the center God's love and grace.

I know of a pastor who grew up in poverty. He grew up on Long Island, which is literally divided by a long railroad track. He lived on the wrong side. He admits that for quite some time his goal in life was to knock himself out being the very best student, then pastor, he could possibly be. And eventually, his hard work paid off and he made it to a pastorate in a very large successful church in Washington DC. This is what he says about that, "By every measurable standard of life, I have crossed the railroad tracks. But none of the happiness I have found in life has come from the things I achieved. All of it came from the gifts I received along the way."

Jesus calls us to reorient ourselves, to see clearly that our security is not in the abundance of our possessions but in the divine hands that hold our open hands. Those hands were stretched out on the cross for us. As we start to see that picture more clearly - we also see more clearly all

the gifts we've been given. And one of the best of those gifts is the people God has placed in our lives.

You've likely heard this before but it's true. As pastors we see it over and over again. When folks are hit with a hard illness or come to the end of their lives - the things they reflect on, the things they are most thankful for are not the trips or the bank accounts or the bigger barns. It is the love of family and the relationships in which they've invested themselves that bring the most joy and meaning.

Perhaps you saw the recent news about United Flight 328. That's the one where the plane soon after takeoff from the Denver Airport, was severely shaken by a loud explosion. It was one of the plane's engines. Clearly something had gone very wrong. When Bob Brown heard the explosion, he looked out his window, saw the damage to the engine and took out his phone to film it. He told reporters this, "We looked at each other, my wife and I, held hands, and just wished our kids that we'd see them again." The pilot was able to turn the plane around and navigate it back toward the airport it had just left. Another passenger, Troy Lewis, said, "As soon as we kind of made the corner and we could see the runway, I made sure our family, we all told each other we loved each other." He said of the whole experience that "It makes you all of a sudden remember all those things that you can so easily forget."

"Watch out! Be on your guard..." says Jesus, "life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." But in a few verses, Jesus also says this, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Friends - all that you are, all that you have are gifts of God. Your future is secure beyond all measure. Truly, it's not about the money. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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