

Greed – Life's Thief

Have you ever bought new stuff to organize and hold your old stuff to make room for more stuff? Do you sometimes find and bring home “good boxes” knowing that someday you’ll probably have some stuff to put in those boxes? Container stores and storage businesses thrive on that kind of thinking. “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”

Have you ever been so envious of or wishful for another’s life that you were unable or unwilling to celebrate his or her successes, abilities, or good fortune? You look at them and say to yourself, “What about me? That’s not fair. Why isn’t that me?” “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”

Has the grammar of your life ever been predominately in the first-person singular, I? I want, I need, I did, I hope, I achieved, I accomplished, I will. I, I, I. “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”

Have you ever bought something to make yourself feel better? Maybe because you were sad, lonely, angry, or scared. You wanted a new life or a new feeling more than a new thing, but you bought it anyway. “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”

If any of this sounds familiar, or if you answered yes to any of these questions, or even if you didn’t but you understand what I am talking about, then you just might know something about greed in your own life.

I say that not as a judgment or a criticism but in recognition that I, and maybe you too, can be as much a barn builder as the guy in the parable Jesus tells in today’s gospel.

Jesus warns, there are all kinds of greed. It might be books, shoes, or any other tangible thing. It might be amassing money, land, or other wealth. But greed can also be about time, attention, approval, love, knowledge, power, control, being right, being in charge, or a thousand other things.

Ultimately, though, greed is not about any of these things. They are just the symptoms or pointers to the deeper issue. The issue is not about quantity but a condition of the heart. Greed is just a way of dealing with our own feelings of deficit and emptiness.

It's not so much about having enough but about being enough. When we believe ourselves to be deficient, when we lose belief in ourselves, when we feel we are not enough, then we get greedy. We use things and other people to fill the hole inside us.

Greed deceives and convinces us that if we just have:

- more money than we will have a more secure future.
- If we get more books, then we'll have more knowledge and answers. People will see us as studious and intelligent.
- If we can get more of your time and attention then we'll feel accepted, important, and relevant.
- If we can gain more power and control then we'll be safe and respected.

Greed uses external things to deal with internal matters and it rarely works. It leaves us wanting more, always seeking the next dollar, or the next word of approval. The thing is that greed steals and deprives us of what we most want. Greed thieves us of our lives.

That doesn't mean that possessions are inherently bad or wrong. The antidote to greed is not necessarily in cleaning out the closet, or giving away our belongings, though in some cases that might be a necessary beginning point.

The real work is interior work. Greed shows us to be living in poverty toward God. The antidote to greed then is to be rich toward God.

That means we invest in ourselves, each other, and the world in the same ways in which Jesus invested himself; through love, mercy, compassion,

justice, hope, courage, acceptance, truth, beauty, generosity. This is the wealth of God. This is the life God shares and invests in us through Jesus Christ.

So, to be rich toward God begins with knowing that we already are God's beloved treasure. There is freedom in that. It is the freedom to live rich toward others and the world. It reveals that there is enough. It declares our lives to be as important and valuable as anyone else's. It eliminates the need for comparison with and judgment of ourselves and others. Being takes precedence over having.

I can't help but wonder if greed might not be at the core of our political contempt and violence in today's world, and the dysfunction and hurt in our relationships.

To the degree greed is present it thieves us of God's wealth. The boxes, shelves, and closets of our lives are already full. We have no need, no desire, no room for God. It isolates us from self, others, and God. Greed works its deception and turns us back on ourselves and the grammar of our life soon becomes first person singular.

I know what I will do.
I will pull down my barns.
I will build larger barns.
I will store my stuff in my new barns.
I will relax.
I will eat.
I will drink.
I will be merry.

When that happens, greed has thieved me of you and the possibility of us. There is no second or third person. There is only me, a "fool" Jesus says in the parable; a fool who closes the barn door after the thief has escaped with my life.

“Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions,” Jesus says. Somewhere deep within we already know this. We really do. This is not new for us. Here’s why I say that.

Think about the day you held your child or grandchild for the very first time. Think about the times you pulled him or her close and whispered your dreams into tiny ears. Recall the last child you saw baptized. Recall the day a friend introduced you to his or her newborn child. Recall the faces of school children or kids on the playground. Do you remember that day? Can you picture their faces?

What were your greatest hopes and dreams for that child? What were your sincerest prayers for his or her life? What did you desire more than anything else for that little one?

Was it a big fancy house? A shelf full of books? A closet full of shoes and purses? Did you pray that they would always be on the winning team, that they would be rich and wealthy? Did you hope they would be number one in their class, or that they would be more powerful, important, and successful than everyone else?

I don’t think that’s what you hoped and prayed for that child. Why weren’t those your first concerns? Because something in you already knew that “life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

And if you know that to be true for them you know it to be true for yourselves. You wanted more for that child.

I’m betting you prayed that child would find meaning and purpose in their life. You hoped their life would be filled with joy. You wished her a world of peace. You prayed they would look in the mirror and see their own beauty, that they would trust their own goodness, and that they discover their own holiness.

You wished them to imagine all the possibilities for their life.

The reason those things were your prayers, hopes, and wishes is because somewhere deep within you know and want those same things for your life. You touched your own richness toward God. You caught a glimpse of the treasure that you are and want to be, the treasure God knows you to already be.

What if you lived that way? How would your life be different? What possibilities would that create in your relationships? What might you need to do to claim yourself as God's treasure, to be rich toward God?

Remember, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." Amen