

“Eat, Drink, and Live It Up! Why Not?” Luke 12:13-21 3/10/19

Recently the Consumer Protection Bureau decided to roll back regulations that protect consumers using so-called Payday Loans. The success of the Payday Loan industry in this action is a good illustration of greed at the corporate level. If you are not familiar with these loans, they are typically high-interest, short-term small loans given predominantly to poorer people. A borrower of a \$500 loan would typically owe \$575 two weeks later- an annual percentage rate of almost 400%! The problem is compounded when the person cannot repay the loan on time. Then an additional, larger loan is needed at the same usurious rate. Half of all payday loans are part of a sequence of at least 10 consecutive loans! This is clearly predatory lending, exploiting our most vulnerable citizens. And it's clear that any moral scruples these loan corporations have are overwhelmed by their greed.

Corporate greed is nothing new. Think of the robber barons of the early 20th century, the Enron and Tyco scams, as well as the Fannie Mae scandal that helped foster the great recession in 2008. This kind of greed has caused untold suffering to millions of people. “But, Dave,” you might ask, “this is all very interesting, but what does it have to do with Lent?” Patience, Grasshopper. You see, greed also operates on a personal level, and none of us are immune to it. And since Lent is a time for self-

examination and introspection, it seems like a good time to explore this particular vice. Jesus talked about it on numerous occasions, like this one in Luke 12.

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And 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.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But 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?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:13-21)

Let’s talk about the parable a little bit. In ancient times, it was common to keep a family inheritance together to maximize its productivity. In this case, the younger brother wants his inheritance to be split off, but his older brother refuses. He tattles to Jesus about his brother, asking Jesus

to intervene. Jesus refuses to arbitrate this family feud, instead using the occasion to talk about the underlying issue of greed. As he often did, Jesus uses a parable.

The farmer in the story was on a roll! He was harvesting bumper crop after bumper crop, and had no more room to store all his produce and goods. So, believing that this run would continue indefinitely, he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. He believes he's got it made in the shade, his future secure, so he can eat, drink, and live it up. Why not?

That farmer is annoyingly similar to many of us, whose homes are stuffed to the gills with all our things! Many of us have even considered adding on to our homes, buying bigger homes, or renting storage units to contain all our stuff! In fact, whole industries have sprung up to help us maximize our home space so we can keep track of all our stuff, or to help us figure what to keep and what to give away. "Does it spark joy in you?"

Back to the farmer. God appears to him, calls him a fool, and informs him that he is going to die that very night. That puts things in a different light, doesn't it? What will happen to all his stuff then? This ending may well have come as a shock to Jesus' listeners, who tended to believe that wealth was a sign of blessing from God! But Jesus wants us to see the dangers of wealth and greed. ¹⁵*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.” (Luke 12:15)

Jesus tells us to be on guard against greed. What is it about “the abundance of possessions” that is a danger to our souls? Here are a few possibilities. First, wealth can easily take the place of God in our lives. It becomes our American idol! We can begin to trust wealth to meet our spiritual needs- the need for security for example. Most of us try to save, perhaps in IRA's or other saving accounts, motivated to some extent by a desire for security, either in the present, or in our later years. And there's nothing wrong with being prudent with our saving! The danger comes when we begin to rely on our money to meet our spiritual need for security, rather than trusting God to do this. So, if we become anxious when the stock market drops, that anxiety may be a sign that we're trusting more in our wealth than in God to take care of us. And the other problem, of course, is that we can never have enough wealth to make us completely secure! Markets crash and mutual funds tank, and our money can disappear very quickly. So, if we depend on wealth to feel secure, we always need more, and the pursuit of more and more wealth begins to drive our decisions, rather than God's expectations for us.

Others of us have our need for self-validation met by our wealth. That attitude is encapsulated by the bumper sticker that reads, “He who

dies with the most toys, wins!” Some people are absolutely driven to accumulate wealth by most any means possible so they can prove that they are the best, the smartest, or the most important. We Christians are supposed to find our validation in the fact that we are creatures made in the very image of God, and that God loves us! But, it’s tempting to replace that with something more tangible, like wealth.

In addition to replacing God in our lives, wealth has another soul impact; It can damage our souls and our character. I remember hearing about the dangers of wealth in church as a child. I remember movies like, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” “A Christmas Carol,” and many TV shows that showed the spiritual cost of having great wealth. We don’t hear such things as much anymore, but the harmful effects of wealth on our character are still real. A recent [Washington Post](#) article, entitled, “Being rich damages your soul. We used to know that,” outlines some of the dangers.

The authors, two University of Virginia professors, cite religious leaders and philosophers from Aristotle to Pope Francis, who say that wealth should always serve as a stepping stone to a greater good. That if money becomes an end in itself, it should be viewed with suspicion. They cite recent studies from the behavioral sciences demonstrating that wealthy people are more likely to shoplift and cheat, more likely to commit adultery and to drink to excess, more likely to cut off other drivers in traffic, more

likely to evade paying their fair share of taxes, and that they give a lower percentage of their income to charity than middle and lower income people! They also have less compassion and empathy toward suffering people, perhaps because they believe that all it takes to be rich is to work hard and make the right choices.

Of course, not every rich person is like this, but there is a tendency for the wealthy to have the same problem that the farmer in our parable had; They often forget the role that God has played in accumulating their wealth. For the farmer, God provided the good land, rain, and sun necessary for good crops. The wealthy today have often inherited a large amount of money they can fall back on when things go wrong, and they have usually received the benefits of a good education. A false sense of self-sufficiency is a common affliction of those who are wealthy, as it was for the farmer.

Finally, in the words of Arthur Simon, “The problem is not that we’ve tried faith and found it wanting, but that we’ve tried mammon and found it addictive and as a result find following Christ inconvenient.”

So, what do we do about all of this? After all Jesus told us to be on guard against all kinds of greed. In the richest country in the world, how do we guard ourselves against the snares of wealth? Paul’s advice to Timothy seems very apt. ¹⁷*As for those who in the present age are rich, command*

them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. (I Tim. 6:17,18)

One of the ways to keep us from “setting our hopes on riches” lies in planning how we use our money. When John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was a student, he lived on 28 pounds each year and gave away 2. When his income increased to 60 pounds, he still lived on 28 pounds and gave away 32. He continued to live on 28 pounds and gave the rest away as he earned 90, then 120 pounds, and so on! This practice protected him against the traps that come with being wealthy.

We could also determine how much we need to live simply, and give the rest away, or use some kind of a graduated tithe, that would increase from 10% as we earn more. A friend of mine has done that and now gives away 50% of his income to charitable causes, including some to this church! Commitment to generous giving can help keep the corrupting influence of wealth in check and keep us from setting our hope on the uncertainty of riches, as Paul says.

Paul also points out the importance of doing good, of being generous in action as well as with our finances. Many of you know the joy that comes from giving your time or treasure to those in need or to a cause you

believe in. You may have experienced that on a mission trip or by serving at the soup kitchen or staying overnight with Gettysburg CARES. Just like accumulating more and more money can be addictive, so can joyful, sacrificial giving of our time and finances. Pursuing the virtue of generosity can keep the vice of greed from getting a chokehold on our souls.

This Lent, I urge you to pay attention to the role that money plays in your life. I think Jesus would urge you to do the same thing! After all, he spoke extensively about the subject! Has money begun to warp your heart in unhealthy ways? What steps could you take to keep it from doing so?