

Luke 12:13-34

Greed disguised as

- justice
- success
- anxiety
- security

Images of greed have been produced in art for many centuries, and those illustrations are always truly ugly. Greed in other people is a terrible thing to behold. But identifying greed in ourselves is very difficult, because we disguise it so well. That was Jesus' topic in Luke 12:13-34.

For the poor, for even the relatively poor, for those who may be well fed and warm but just less wealthy than others, the Biblical teaching about greed has been interpreted as a not-so-subtle way of keeping the lower classes in check. Karl Marx described religion as the "placebo of the masses" because, he wrote, organized religion tried to make the poor, the oppressed, content with their lot, which, of course, plays right into the hands of greedy people who already have power, because it maintains the status quo. If you can convince the have-nots that being on the bottom is OK, then you can remain on top, and revolution is less likely. So, greed has been marketed as ambition, as equality, as justice. People without greed have been characterized as spineless, lazy, or of limited ability.

We could classify ourselves as either the rich or the poor. When we compare ourselves with those on the top, we can make ourselves appear pathetically poor despite the fact that we have homes full of luxuries - luxuries we now call necessities, but which a generation or two ago were outrageously luxurious - two cars, air conditioning, automatic washers, indoor plumbing.

In reality, we are the rich. Even those on public assistance in this country, when compared with the population of the whole world, rank in the top 25%. But we, the wealthy of the world, seem to have bought in to the idea that, without money, our influence is reduced. Without money and its power, our lives would be wasted.

That may sound a little harsh, but what do we think of a very talented person who chooses not to compete, in either the business world or the sports arena? We think there must be something wrong with that person. Without the worldly rewards of greed, we are made to feel inadequate.

The crowds Jesus addressed were composed of people much like us, although Jesus' audiences contained a much higher percentage of people who really were not sure whether they would have enough to eat. The poor wanted to get ahead, and were honored for doing so. The rich, even the God-fearing rich, wanted to stay that way. But the faithful from both groups did not see themselves as greedy. Greed was a word reserved for those so possessed by the pursuit of money that it drove everything else from their lives. Actually, greed was a word reserved for those who didn't disguise it very well.

In Luke 12, Jesus was teaching His disciples as a large crowd listened in. He began the lesson teaching about hypocrisy, but He was interrupted by someone in the crowd, which prompted Him to start on a new topic: the disguises of greed. The first, greed disguised as justice.

Luke 12:13-15

13 And someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the {family} inheritance with me."

14 But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over you?"

15 And He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not {even} when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

If you read Jesus' words before this man's request, you will find that there is just no connection. I get the impression that this man was not exactly listening to Jesus, but rather was watching for an opening. In his mind, his cause was right. He was the victim of a grave injustice and it needed to be corrected. Apparently, he thought that an opinion from someone held in high regard such as Jesus would advance his claim.

Jesus called it greed.

I can almost hear the man in the crowd saying, "But, but, but..." It is reasonable to assume that this man's claim was legally valid, that he really was a victim of an injustice. Jesus' point was from the man's heart. Even though he was a victim, his motivation was not really justice. It was greed.

Disguising greed as a noble motive has been happening for a long time and continues to this day. Wars have been fought because leaders have convinced their followers that some great principle was at stake: liberty, human rights, compassion. But they were really no more than land grabs and power struggles.

For centuries, individuals have tried to disguise law-breaking as freedom and justice: using noble motives to hide their greed for having it their own way without a care for how they trample the rights of others and the rule of law.

This same problem arose in the early church. In Corinth, as you probably could guess, church members were suing each other in civil court, presumably over business and liability issues, in the name of justice. But Paul said, "Why not rather be defrauded?"

The fellow in this crowd undoubtedly was discouraged by the reply he got from Jesus. "Not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." Putting aside for the moment that the crowd thought of Jesus as at least a prophet, putting aside that He is the Son of God, this advice came from someone who was poor. If a rich person advised a poor person not to focus so much on money, that life was more than possessions, the poor person would not be likely to accept the advice very well. But Jesus had nothing, yet He implied that He had an abundance when it came to life.

That is perhaps the hardest concept of which to convince ourselves, that we have abundant life without money. As many a comedian has repeated, "I've been rich and I've been poor, and let me tell you, rich is better." But life, its joys and fulfillment, have nothing to do with money, with possessions. We can destroy the abundant life of which Jesus spoke in John 10:10 with possessions. Those possessions can never fill life, or even make it easier.

Jesus went on to describe this. Greed disguised as success.

Luke 12:16-21

16 And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive.

17 "And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?'

18 "And he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'

19 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years {to come;} take your ease, eat, drink {and} be merry."

20 "But God said to him, 'You fool! This {very} night your soul is required of you; and {now} who will own what you have prepared?'

21 "So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

This is a parable, not a description of a particular person. The idea of a parable is to use a real-life situation to illustrate a point. The idea of a successful farmer acting in this manner would not seem at all unusual to the crowd.

So what did this rich farmer do wrong? Was the problem that he wanted to build bigger barns? Jesus didn't mention that, and it would seem only a good business decision.

Was his problem that he didn't share his bounty? Whether he tithed, presented huge thank offerings at the Temple, or gave generously to the poor are not mentioned at all. From the custom of the time, he probably did all three.

No, his problem was not an obvious greediness. Jesus' point, in verse 21, was that, while he certainly had gained treasures for himself, he was not similarly rich toward God.

I think it is safe to assume that this rich farmer was a talented person. While he may have inherited a substantial portion of his wealth, he needed to be talented in order to keep it, or, in his case, to increase it substantially.

Similarly, we can observe around us that talented people tend to have an easier time accumulating money. They get higher paying jobs not because they are good people but because their talents make profit for their employers. Part of our financial success is due to talents with which we were born. Some people will never make very much money because their particular God-given talents don't happen to be in areas for which there are high paying jobs.

Despite how obvious that is, somehow we have assigned value as a person to the ability to make money. That is a means of disguising greed as success. Wealth does not make life easier.

This rich farmer felt successful because he had exercised the talent with which he was born and accumulated a lot of wealth, forgetting that success is measured by God, not your accountant.

So what is it to be "rich toward God?" When Jesus spoke to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:21, and also in this chapter in verse 23, He gave the example of selling our possessions and giving to the poor, and we will consider that idea more when we get to that paragraph.

But the bottom line for the wealthy farmer seemed to be that he used his God-given talents for himself, and forgot the one who gave the talent. That attitude is similar to that which Paul found in Corinth where God-given miraculous powers were being used for self-promotion. Paul's bottom line in 1 Corinthians 14 was, "but the ungifted are not edified."

Financial success will always be relatively easy for the talented. But rather than feeling successful because we have achieved the inevitable by virtue of God's gift as this wealthy farmer did, Jesus points out that this bounty is our responsibility, a gift to be shared.

Jesus continues His lesson with a third disguise of greed, anxiety.

Luke 12:22-30

22 And He said to His disciples, "For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for {your} life, {as to} what you shall eat; nor for your body, {as to} what you shall put on.

23 "For life is more than food, and the body than clothing.

24 "Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and they have no storeroom nor barn; and {yet} God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!
25 "And which of you by being anxious can add a {single} cubit to his life's span?
26 "If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why are you anxious about other matters?
27 "Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these.
28 "But if God so arrays the grass in the field, which is {alive} today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more {will He clothe} you, O men of little faith!
29 "And do not seek what you shall eat, and what you shall drink, and do not keep worrying.
30 "For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things.

We can hide greed behind noble concepts like justice, and behind worldly goals like wealth, but those are positive disguises. They work because the disguise dresses up an ugly quality in pleasant clothing. Here is one from the other side, a negative disguise. We sometimes hide greed behind anxiety.

Who would think of looking for greed in such a terrible place? Wouldn't we rather just keep the greed out in the open and enjoy it rather than suffering with anxiety? I think the reason that many people have chosen anxiety as their disguise for greed is because, for thousands of years, religion has been identified with worry. Will I please the gods? Will they smile on me? Will I pass muster on Judgment Day? But Jesus and later Paul, in several places each, tell us that anxiety and the gospel don't go together.

Verse 23, "For life is more than food." In those days, the poor did worry about food, whether there would be food tomorrow. Today, our worries are different and definitely less catastrophic, but we make them just as worrisome. A number of young people have turned to crime in order to have the right shoes. Not just to have shoes, they had to have the right \$150 pair of athletic shoes. So they stole, even murdered, to get them. We look at those news reports and say, "Life is more than shoes!" That's what Jesus was saying to His audience. Their concern over seemingly important and justifiable issues like food and clothing were in the same class as fashionable shoes.

Jesus' example of ravens and lillies illustrate that God thinks we are important. "Your Father knows that you need these things," like food and clothing. But, notice that neither the ravens nor the lilies had anything in their savings accounts. They had no storerooms or barns. The grass died young and was thrown in the furnace.

Our anxiety over food and clothing, about our financial security in general, is misplaced. We think that a little financial security (nothing too extravagant so as not to appear greedy) will make us happy. This, of course, leads to the inescapable conclusion that only the wealthy can be happy.

So how do we dispose of that anxiety that covers for our greed? Jesus says to consider how God cares for the other parts of creation. We need to get over the assumption that we will live forever, or even to a ripe old age, to get over the assumption that we must have food and clothing. Will our worry make us more likely to get them? Of course not. What if we don't get them? Then we'll die, like the grass. Our worry won't make us live longer, but probably shorter. And being poor and hungry like many of the faithful recorded in the Scriptures won't separate us from the love of God (as Paul explained at the end of Romans 8). If we die, we gain, not lose.

The world eagerly seeks worldly gain, and tries to make us feel guilty for not having their goals.

Jesus continues in His lesson with the fourth disguise of greed, security.

Luke 12:31-34

- 31 "But seek for His kingdom, and these things shall be added to you.
32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom.
33 "Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves purses which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys.
34 "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

That line in verse 31, "And these things shall be added to you," has been long abused. Many people over the centuries have taught or expected that, if they tried to be faithful, God would make them financially secure. This is pseudo-religion's greed disguised as security. But the history recorded in the Scriptures shows that the quantity of things that shall be added is highly variable. Hebrews 11 records several of the less appealing ways in which faithful people have died.

Yet, we believe we want financial security. But what will we have when we get there? Many people have saved for their old age so that, as they put it, they won't be a burden. Yet Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:4 that caring for aging parents is how we learn to practice piety and to make some return to our parents. If we carefully orchestrate our lives so as to be financially secure and not a burden, we remove an educational opportunity that God had planned. Security is a form of greed.

Instead, Jesus said, "Seek the kingdom." The rest will take care of itself. Using that example of security in our old age, God has provided. 1 Timothy 5 also accounts for older Christians who do not have children (at least children who practice piety). God's means of providing for us often requires depending on someone else. That's how we learn to trust. God's method gives us the things we need in a form that has lasting value.

So what about that line, "Sell your possessions and give to charity?" Although Jesus was speaking only to his disciples here (verse 22), He knew the crowd was listening. He repeated virtually the same words to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:21 and the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke. To what extent, to what extreme, do we take this? This looks like a place where greed could be disguised as responsible financial management. So, I will just cite what I think are relevant examples from the Scriptures and let you draw your own conclusions.

First, Jesus and His disciples were supported mainly by donations, yet even they were known for distributing their excess beyond money for daily food to the poor. That's how Judas got away from the Last Supper scene (John 13:29). The disciples thought he was going out for that purpose. Yet, when the disciples complained that perfume worth a year's wages was being wasted on Jesus' personal comfort, He said (John 12:8), "The poor you will have with you always, but you will not always have Me." So, this giving to charity here in Luke is not an absolute. Other godly purposes are OK, too.

Second, when Paul was collecting money for famine relief of Christians in Israel from Christians in Turkey and Greece, they, too, wondered how much giving was appropriate. Paul turned (in 1 Corinthians 8:15) to the example in Exodus 16 about the manna. "He who had too much had none too much and he who had too little had no lack." When God sent manna 6 days a week for the Israelites in the wilderness, they soon learned that the bread they made with it

would not keep overnight, except for the Friday manna which would keep through the Sabbath. They had to gather manna six mornings a week. Since they couldn't keep it anyway, they were prompted to share. Those with too much were giving away that which God had supplied (and which would spoil by morning anyway). Paul's comparison for the Corinthians was that it was not for the ease of the Christians in Israel and for their hardship, but by way of equality. It seemed that giving to those in need was not an absolute, but an equality among those in the kingdom.

Third, this system seems ripe for those who would take advantage. The lazy might decide to be on the receiving end permanently. Paul had to address that excuse for the church in Thessalonika (2 Thessalonians 3:10), "If anyone will not work, neither let him eat." It seems that we must decide who cannot work and who will not work.

But whatever cautions or limitations about giving to charity we might find, we must be sure we still do it, that our caution does not become a covering for greed. A good indicator of the deceitfulness of riches is the charitable contributions line on the Schedule A of your Form 1040. If you don't have enough contributions to itemize, without considering any other form of deduction, something went terribly wrong. Does anyone know the limit imposed by the IRS on charitable giving? I know people who have run into that limit. Do you even know where it is? Is that greed disguised as ignorance?

Jesus closed His lesson with a summary to the whole matter of money, in verse 34, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."