

A Sermon for DaySpring

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Greed's Kryptonite

Luke 12.13-21

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Today's gospel reading is a warning about greed. That's always timely for us in different ways, I'm sure, and in important ways. It's also timely considering the daydreaming I know I did at least for a few minutes this week about winning that big ol' lottery for which I didn't even hold a ticket.

On Friday evening, they announced the winning numbers for the Powerball, a lottery spanning 45 states that had reached a prize total of \$1.3 billion dollars. The winner takes home about \$600 million. That's a chunk of change, right? I mean, what do you do with that? Is that even possible to spend? Apparently, one person had the right numbers and has won. It's not me. And I suspect it's not you.

It's well known that winning the lottery does not equal happiness in life for every winner. There are plenty of stories of people who won big and were miserable, haunted by what they thought was their good fortune. They squander everything quickly; get taken advantage of, make terrible investments, and go bankrupt. Winning big ruins their lives. These are more than outliers; it's a common situation. People who win cartoonishly huge lotteries don't have all their problems solved; they just have a whole new set of problems. It's not just lottery winnings. Americans equate the pursuit of happiness with the accumulation of wealth, but studies show the correlation just isn't there. I don't mean to glorify poverty. Having some financial resources gives you advantages you wouldn't otherwise have, but there's a certain point where money and possessions become a burden instead of relief, and a psychological prison instead of a ticket to freedom.

Yet the enticement of riches remains, and not just for the windfall of a lucky lottery ticket. We are enticed by riches, by grasping what is just beyond our reach. This is how money works on us. When asked, "How much is enough?" wasn't it Rockefeller who responded, "Just a little bit more"? Most of us aren't people who have so much we don't know what to do with it; most of us carry the stress of wondering if the money we have will go far enough for what we need.

That reality was even more true in Jesus's day. People didn't have retirement or savings accounts; they had their daily bread if they had that day's work. But Jesus still thought it important to warn about greed. He tells a parable about someone who found himself with cartoonish wealth, the kind most people dream of, and asks what did he do, and did it make him happy? Spoiler: it did not.

"Be on guard," Jesus warns, "against all kinds of greed-for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

The man in the story believes he is happy because he has had the good fortune of an exceptional year on the farm and feels secure because of the goods he has accumulated. The rich man considers his situation: the many possessions piled up, the many years these assets assure him, and the tranquility and happiness they make possible.

I mean, it sounds pretty nice. You've had good fortune, not even by winning at gambling, which has its moral problems, but through your business, you've amassed a collection of goods that exceed your ability to store them, so you plan for your future by planning to build bigger storehouses. With all this assured, you are free to eat, drink, relax, and be merry. The last part sounds like a really nice vacation. I'm very happy to hear that you've had a trip where you've been able to eat, drink, relax, and be merry. Some of my very favorite memories are of vacations with people I love and doing those very same things. What's wrong with this? What makes him a fool?

Well, for starters, instead of the many years the man thinks he has guaranteed, God says tonight, you will die. Instead of enjoyment of life, he is confronted with a reckoning for his life. And instead of the accumulation of goods, those goods will go to someone else. All of these things earn him the nickname of 'fool' because he thinks of things that are concrete but are actually a fantasy. The fantasy is that everything we see and want to possess should be ours for our enjoyment, and that those things actually increase our enjoyment.

Happiness is more often found in the simplicities of life, not the accumulation of goods. The things that make people happy and whole are often free or close to it: fresh air, a walk in the woods, laughter with friends, a good story, a song, a simple meal, going to bed at the end of the day at peace with who you are and what you have. But we have a hard time seeing that. We want more things—no matter how much we have, we want more things. The man in the story decided to build bigger barns to hold all his things and all the things he could get. What he had already wasn't enough. More, I want more. What is more? More than what I have now.

Jesus says to beware of all kinds of greed. There are different kinds of greed?

In Colossians, the Apostle warns against a list of attitudes and habits that should be put to death so that we can live free and fully in Christ. Among those is greed which is equated with idolatry. That's interesting. When I think of idolatry, I think of someone bowing before a stone statue of some false god. Or the Israelites dancing around the golden calf that Aaron had made and said, 'this is your god who brought you out of Egypt.' When the 10 commandments declare: you shall not make false idols, I think: I'm not worshipping any statues. I got that one, check.

But if greed is idolatry, that changes things. If greed is idolatry, then false idols may be closer than we realize. Idolatry is whenever anything substitutes for God. It's when anything NOT God takes the place OF God. That before which I orient by life, desires, and behavior is my god. So, it makes total sense that greed is like a false god. The god Greed orders lives, shapes desires, and determines behaviors like a religion. Greed makes everything else an object to be possessed for

my own supposed benefit. To that end, then, the other things on Paul's list are also forms of greed: sexual immorality, impurity, disordered passions, evil desires. Those are each a kind of greed, maybe the kinds Jesus was thinking about: they are all names for ways we try to take and possess something or someone for our own desire, not for their good or the good of others or for the glory of God. It's about me. Sometimes it's money and possessions; sometimes it's other people. By objectifying the other: that's how we turn people with whom we can have relationships into things that we use for our own desire.

I used to have a professor who warned us of this. He'd say, "Be careful when you hear I love you because I love you can mean I love me and I want to use you to help me love me more." Beware: You've been turned into an object to be added to someone else's possessions. There really are different kinds of greed that all, in their way, are forms of idolatry when we turn in on ourselves. We bend in on ourselves and from there we see everything else in the world merely existing to serve us and our desires. That's the man with all the barns in Jesus's story as he surveys the landscape of his success. He wants it all, for himself, and he wants even more. But after all that, what has his life come to? His life will be required of him that night, and you can't take it with you.

So, the first problem is that he didn't account for God in his life. His life is actually bigger than something he could see and possess. He was going to face a reckoning, and what is the measure of a man's life? It's not in what he's accumulated. It's in what he's given away. In all the years I've attended and been part of funerals, I can't think of a single time when someone eulogized the deceased by commenting on what they owned. It was always about who they were and how they had blessed the people around them. That's the measure of our lives in God's sight. Colossians says beautifully, "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

An attitude of thanksgiving is greed's kryptonite.

The rich man in the story has a moral universe of one entity. I think this is the real problem, the root anyway of every other problem. Read the story, and pay attention to the pronouns. If you circle them, what you'll circle is I, I, my, I my, my, I my. The grammar is all first-person singular. There's not another person in his mind or heart. The one time he uses the 2nd person you, he's talking to himself! He's the only character in his life drama. Which means that when he considers the abundance that has come to him, there's no one else to bless, there's no one to thank, there's no one to share, there's no one who has a claim on him. It sounds terribly lonely. Furthermore, his singularity is in sharp contrast to the way crops actually come in. He didn't plant or harvest all that on his own. What about his workers? Not even on his mind. Mindfulness of the land isn't there either. *The land of a rich man* produced abundantly. He didn't do this on his own. The land brought forth the crops, but there's no attention or gratitude for the rain or soil, the seed or sunlight. It's just "my crop." Our lives are constituted by relationship with one another and with the land, and with God. And he's extracted himself from all just as soon as he could.

There is no god in his moral universe. No God to whom he owes thanks, or from whom he responds with generosity. He's living like an a-theist. No god. No neighbor. No gratitude. It sounds terribly lonely no matter how big your barns or how many your possessions.

We are all tempted to live this way—whether we have a lot—big barns—or whether we have tiny storehouses. This temptation is universal because it's not the size of the barn, it's the next size up from the barn you have.

The parable ends with a punchline: So, it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God. What does it mean to be rich toward God? I think it's right in the heart of whatever the opposite is of storing treasures for yourself. Instead of storing up treasures for yourself, how about being a giver of treasures to those around you: treasures of resources, sure, but also of opportunities, blessing, happiness, delight, love, joy, peace.

We are made for these relationships. Humans do not just have relations; we are our relations. Our very selves are constituted by the shape of those relations with God, with the land, with one another. The tragedy of this man in the parable is that his abundance deadened him to all of those relationships that he could have enriched, but he didn't. His arms and his life were enfolded in himself. His life would be required of him that night, but in every way that matters, he was already dead.

A story like this makes plain the emptiness of not just a consumeristic world. That seems obvious. But perhaps less obvious is this: it also makes plain the emptiness of a religion that says to put God first with a few churchy things, and then after that, it's all up to you whatever you want to do. We are not called merely to give God a nod and then go on with our self-centered lives and ambitions. Forbid the thought that religion is to give an hour to Jesus and then go out and serve yourself with all the other hours. Our reading from Colossians tells about spiritual transformation sparked by baptism and then lived out in everything else in our lives. Where we are not bent over on ourselves, but we are free to extend our lives—for God to extend himself through our lives into the lives of others. Isn't this how you want to live? And so many of you do.

Colossians says, "Put on kindness, humility, meekness, patience. Bear with one another. Forgive one another. Above all this put on love which binds everything together in harmony. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Let the word of Christ dwell richly within you."

Put to death what's behind you; live for what's ahead. Throw off the old cloaks that bind you; Put on the new robes of God's righteousness. You're dead to the old with its greeds and isolations; you're born to the new in Christ with his peace and his love. Put off the old; put on the new. It is the way of abundance in everything that actually matters.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

