

# **Sermon: Guard against greed**

## **Luke 12:13-21**

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This week I got 13.5 Egyptian pound for my Euro and that made me feel good. But I also read that 28% of Egyptians live under the poverty line, and this percentage is increasing.

You know what the poverty line is? That is if here in Egypt a person has less than 480 LE to spend per month.

It is easy for me to go to the supermarket and fill the trolley and then pay that sort of amount and not think twice about it.

There is a link between the fact that I get 13.5LE for my Euro, and the poverty of the people. There is a link between my advantage and their disadvantage.

Some people fill their pockets, at the expense of others who have nothing. This is a worldwide problem.

The greed of bankers has led to economic crisis. The greed of the multinational companies exploits nature and people. In the rat-race for more and more, some gain, and most people lose.

#### **1. Greed is dangerous**

Jesus was surrounded by thousands of people, and they asked him all sorts of questions. I guess this was a bit like a press conference where every journalist shouts his questions, hoping to be heard and hoping for an answer.

There were two brothers in the crowd, and one of them is shouting his question - and a bit impolite really. His question was irrelevant for the thousands of others. He just wanted some money from his brother, and his brother does not like to pay him.

'Jesus, be my arbitrator. My brother here does not want to share his inheritance with me.' But Jesus refuses to be their judge. However, he does give an answer that is a good lesson for all people.

"Take care and be on your guard against all greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions," Jesus tells them.

Take care and be on your guard against greed.

Jesus puts his finger on the sore spot of these two brothers. Greed is what Jesus sees in the request of the brother who wants money. And greed is what he sees in the attitude of the other brother who does not want to share.

Both of the are prepared to risk their brotherly relationship for having more possessions. More land. More money. More things. At the expense of the other.

Greed is dangerous.

Not all agree with that. In a 1987 film called Wall Street, one of the actors, Michael Douglas, says:

"Greed [...] is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, for knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind."

This is certainly how many people think. And there is a bit of truth in this. Without the desire for more we would not be motivated to develop our world.

But greed is really the desire for always more. A desire that never stops. So we work hard for more salary, a bigger house, a better car, a larger pension.

Jesus warned against the attitude of always wanting more. We must not let our life be defined by what we possess. If we think that we are what we own, yes, then we will always want more and we will never be satisfied.

I find it amazing how many millionaires, even billionaires, seem never tired of trying to amass more. They are never satisfied.

And have you noticed that, strangely, we all seem to value those people highly? We take people with money often more seriously than poor people. This is not good, but it seems so deeply ingrained in us.

The rich fool in Jesus' parable is a man who would likely be praised by our culture, and perhaps in some of our churches. He was a wealthy man. That seems to speak well of him, especially in a time when men equate spirituality and success.

But to define our value, our life, by what we have, or what others have, degrades us humans. As if my stamp collection or my car or my pension makes me a more valuable person.

And if we do define ourselves by our possessions, or by our position in society, then surely, we must strive at all cost to get more. That is why so many people try to elbow themselves up in life. That is why some people are willing to give up good family relationships and friendships.

Working hard for earning what we need, that is good. That is what a responsible Christian does. But the intense desire for what we do not need, over and above what is normal, creates unpleasant people. Think of Mr Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's A Christmas Carol.

I know this is a lesson we never learn fully well; we seem to have an innate tendency to want more, more, more. To learn to share and to give, needs special grace, is my impression.

## **2. Store all my grain and my goods**

In order to explain this principle, that our life is more than what we possess, Jesus tells his audience a little story. I think we can easily identify with the rich man in this story.

The land of a wealthy man produced much. His income was increasing. It was raining money for him, after a few bumper crops.

So what to do! He did what a normal businessmen do. He build new barns, he stored more of his wealth. We would today say, he put his money in the bank, he made sure he had the best interest rate, and that's it.

Look at my beautiful barns, they are so full. Look at my monthly bank statement - it is going so well with me!

Jesus did not say that the man became a big spender. He carefully kept what he possessed in the barns, and he enjoyed the idea that he could now relax. He had enough stored up for a secure future. His pension was taken care of.

This same issue is so important in our societies today. Security for later; you do not know when you might need extra; financial independence; no to all worries; put a bit more in your pension plan, work a bit harder, earn a bit more.

Jesus call this attitude that we always want more: greed.

Even our national and international economies are build on this concept of the need for growth. When our economies contract, we think we face a disaster; we hold our leaders accountable for making sure that our GDP grows by a few percent per year. If not, something must be really wrong.

So we are told, work harder, earn more, and by all means, spend more. Gather more goodies, surround yourself with more luxury, and we will all be well.

But has this made us happier people? Erich Fromm, a German philosopher, describes greed as "a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction."

It does not satisfy, because increased possessions is not the ultimate goal of nations and individuals. All growth is ambivalent. It is essential if we are to develop, but it imprisons us if we consider it the supreme good, and it also restricts our vision. We are made for God - not for money.

The exclusive pursuit of possessions is an obstacle to individual fulfillment and to finding our true greatness. Both for nations and for individuals, avarice is the most evident form of moral underdevelopment. This is why the church has always seen greed, avarice, as one of the seven cardinal sins.

### **3. Being rich toward God**

The rich man in the parable miscalculated - because one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

The man said to his soul, "soul, you have stored so much that you can now start to enjoy life".

That is, by the way, a very common mistake. The idea: if only I have this or that, if only I have that other job, if only I have more money, then I can finally relax, eat, drink and be merry.

It is untrue, as we all know from experience. Because whenever we have more, when we have reached that better salary or that better car, then after a while it does not satisfy and we want more again.

The Romans had a proverb which said that money was like sea-water; the more a man drank the thirstier he became.

The man in the parable miscalculated because he had forgotten about God. He had worked hard, saved much, and then God told him that he was a fool and he died.

Someone whose sole focus is on more of this and more of that, is called a fool by God. First, because during his life he had a very distorted view of himself. As if your value is in what you have.

And secondly, because we will all die, and how do all our possession help us to meet with God?

The punchline in the end of the parable is, "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

To live for things, for money, for a good house, is irresponsible. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul speaks of greed and he calls it idolatry. The worship of things.

We humans have been made in the image of God; if we as images of God worship what is created, we really lower ourself.

So we must worry less about what we have, or about what we would like to have. And we must worry more about our relationship with God. Jesus says that we must be 'rich toward God'. That is, rich in accordance with what God considers important.

Amassing wealth for ourselves is especially problematic as long as we meet with people who do not know what to eat tomorrow. God himself is known for his grace, for his attitude of giving. And as his children, we desire to be like our Father, surely!

God never tires from giving to us, and that does not make him poorer. And we, if we do good with what we possess, we will never become poor; the opposite, it will certainly make us richer 'toward God'. That is not richest in monetary terms, but in a relationship with God, in love for other people.

We must be responsible people; responsible parents; responsible citizens. So we must be wise with our money and our possessions. But that can never be at the expense of relationships, of friends, of colleagues.

And it must never be at the expense of ourselves. If we begin to see ourselves as valuable because of what we have, we degrade ourselves. And actually, we degrade God our creator who made us very valuable - valuable as the naked people who came out of our mothers womb.

A proverb says, shrouds have no pockets. We came into the world naked, and we leave with nothing.

The only things that last are the things that made us 'rich in God'

St Augustine, in his sermon 36.9, said, " I was hungry and you did not give me to eat... The rich man in the parable did not realize that the bellies of the poor are much safer storerooms than his barns."

To have possessions is not bad but good. But we have them in order to do good to others.

Money in the bank is temporary, and has no value for eternity as long as it is in the bank; food in the belly of the poor, your help for other people, that is seen by God and that follows you into eternity.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus tells all of us to take care, to guard against greed. Greed is, it seems a powerful motive that can easily overwhelm us.

The best antidote to greed is to see that our life is temporary; one day, our Lord will tell us - its enough. Your life is finished.

And then we have to give account for our life. This knowledge is a great antidote against focussing on ourselves and our possessions only.

The best way today to test whether you are greedy, is to see whether you are able to give money away. Not just a few crumbs crumbs, but seriously.

Do you know people who need financial help? People who are pressed down by need, because they have not? Make up your mind and do something serious for them.

Because money in an empty belly is money invested in the bank of God. While money in our pocket or in our own bank, may one day speak against us.

**Amen**