

LUKE 12:13–21. (EHV)

Someone from the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But Jesus said to him, “Man, who appointed me to be a judge or an arbitrator over you?” Then he said to them, “Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because a man’s life is not measured by how many possessions he has.” He told them a parable: “The land of a certain rich man produced very well. He was thinking to himself, ‘What will I do, because I do not have anywhere to store my crops?’ He said, ‘This is what I will do. I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and goods. And I will tell my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy. Eat, drink, and be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your soul will be demanded from you. Now who will get what you have prepared?’ That is how it will be for anyone who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

If you had to pick an evil that is the particular poison of our culture and society today, which one would you identify? Maybe you would disagree with me, but I think it has to be sins against the Sixth Commandment—lust and all the actions and activities that go along with it. Lust is the driving force behind the pornography industry, which has objectified and made slaves out of countless women and has been responsible for child abductions and trafficking. Of course it also makes slaves out of men, appealing to their basest instincts and effectively turning them into animals who are constantly only thinking about one thing and contributing very little that is useful to society. Lust is in large part the driving force behind the abortion industry. Men and women want to be able to satisfy their lust whenever they want, without having to live with the attendant consequences and responsibilities. In cases where the mother does decide to live with those consequences and responsibilities by herself, that lust often results in poverty and sometimes crime for her children. Lust is therefore largely responsible for the breakdown and decline of the nuclear family in our society, and that in turn negatively affects a whole host of things—community leadership, economic stability, education, church membership and attendance, the quality of routine in-person interactions, and many others.

But perhaps our country’s glaring and growing Sixth Commandment sins are harmful to us in another way, even if we ourselves don’t happen to struggle in that particular area. They’re also harmful in that they can easily overshadow another sin which our country, and humanity as a whole, struggles with—greed. After all, isn’t it interesting that, when Paul told us to put to death whatever is worldly in us, he mentioned sexual immorality, uncleanness, and lust, but he didn’t emphasize that they were also idolatry, even though they are? He told us also to put greed to death, and then he emphasized that *that* is idolatry. In other words, when we break the Ninth and Tenth Commandments by coveting what God does not give us, we are also breaking the First Commandment and worshipping another god, the god by the name of Stuff.

Jesus himself tells us to **guard against greed** in our Gospel this morning. He tells us why we need to guard against it, and he gives us the strength to do so.

1.

The beginning of this Gospel account is almost like something out of a sitcom. Jesus has just finished talking about things like hypocrisy, our worth in God's sight, the sin against the Holy Spirit, and defending our faith in front of people who have power and influence on earth. And suddenly a man randomly calls out from the crowd, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Who is this guy anyway? Has he been listening to anything Jesus has been saying?

He certainly has been listening, but only with selfish motives and so only with half an ear. He knows that everything Jesus says is wise and right and true, but he is listening to him only to the end that Jesus might be able to help him with his financial situation. This man's parents had apparently passed away recently, but his brother wasn't dividing the inheritance they had left them like he should have. So this man goes to church, so to speak, and brings his brother along, hoping that Jesus will preach to his audience about sharing what they have been given—not so that *he* can learn better how to share, but so that he can turn and look at his brother and say, "See?"

Doesn't sound so funny and strange anymore, does it? How often don't we do the same? Instead of actually listening to what Jesus has to say to us, and using what he says to examine ourselves and apply it to ourselves, don't we often listen to him with someone else in mind? "Aha! I hope that person is listening. This is exactly what he needs to hear!" Or, "Yes! Now I know how to show that person she's wrong."

But the sermon Jesus is preaching on this occasion isn't really helping this man. So finally he just calls out, "Jesus, you speak with authority, and your judgments are always right. So can you tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me?"

Jesus initially responds by drawing attention to the distinction between his kingdom and the kingdom of the world, the distinction between Church and state: "Man, who appointed me to be a judge or an arbitrator over you?" In other words, Jesus is saying, "This isn't my job," but not in a selfish way like we tend to say it when we just want to get out of a heavy responsibility. Jesus is a representative of the kingdom of heaven. He is a preacher of the gospel. This man's dispute with his brother is not a matter to be settled by the Church. It is a matter to be settled by a judge or an arbitrator. The Church's purview is souls and eternal life. The state's purview is temporal life and property.

But since Jesus is concerned about souls, that isn't all he says to the man. He doesn't want to give the man the impression that if he simply hires an arbitrator who convinces his brother to cough over half the inheritance, then everything will be a-okay. The fact that he was willing to interrupt Jesus about this inheritance dispute, the fact that it was such a burning concern on his mind, suggests that, even if this man reaches a favorable settlement to his dispute with his brother, he has deeper problems.

So Jesus continues, addressing not just this man, but everyone in the crowd: "Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because a man's life is not measured by how many possessions he has." The Greek word for *greed* simply means "the state of having more." That in itself is interesting, because it suggests that, in the common mind, it is those who have more who are inherently greedy. It suggests that a poor person cannot be greedy. But if you automatically think of a rich person as being greedy, that actually betrays that you are probably the one who is

greedy, because your animosity suggests that you are jealous of him. You don't think he should have all that stuff; it would be much better off in your possession.

Greed isn't having more; it's wanting more. It's not being happy unless you get more. It's not being content with what God gives you. It's thinking, as Jesus says here, that your life consists in how many possessions you are able to accumulate—whether it's land, homes, furniture, vehicles, toys, money, or anything else.

If you think you don't struggle with greed, let me ask you this: What if someone asked you to sketch out your life? How would you characterize yourself? How would you describe your life? And if your description would include any of your stuff, as if that was an integral part of your life, then you have to ask yourself, "So if I lost that—if I lost all my land, my house, my furniture, my heirlooms, my outfits, my hunting and fishing equipment, my vehicles, my toys—does that mean I would cease to be myself? Would I be psychologically lost as a person?"

Jesus tells us a parable to show us the danger that our greed poses: "The land of a certain rich man produced very well. He was thinking to himself, 'What will I do, since I do not have anywhere to store my crops?' He said, 'This is what I will do. I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and goods. And I will tell my soul, "Soul, you have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy. Eat, drink, and be merry."' But God said to him, 'You fool, this night your soul will be demanded from you. And all the things you prepared, whose will they be?'" When Jesus talks about the man's soul being demanded from him, he uses a banking term. It's the kind of demanding that a person or institution does when they've loaned something to you and they've waited long enough and it's time for them to call it in. By talking like this, Jesus is reminding us that our soul or life is on loan from God, and we are but stewards of all the possessions he gives us. So if we are merely living for those possessions, characterizing our life by those possessions, living to find happiness in wealth, then what are we going to have to say when our life is taken from us, which could happen today, and we are suddenly standing before God? And guess what? As the saying goes, you never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul. All that stuff you lived for and that characterized your life—you are going to lose it. It is going to go to someone else.

"That is how it will be for anyone who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." Sudden judgment. Eternal judgment. Without any of your stuff, which wasn't really yours to begin with.

2.

If we don't want it to be that way for us, Jesus says the alternative life is one in which we are rich toward God, a life that is not characterized by seeing how much we can amass for ourselves, but how we can use what we've been given to honor the One who has loaned it to us.

But that requires a change of heart, since greed is a heart problem. So how do we get that change of heart?

We can only be rich toward God if we constantly keep in mind how undeservingly rich he has been toward us. We can only be rich toward God if we keep in mind that he has not appointed his Son to be judge over us, even though he could have. He could have appointed him judge over us, and his Son could have analyzed the evidence and rightly declared, "Not only do neither you nor your brother deserve that inheritance, but you don't deserve anything on earth

because of your natural selfishness and your natural animosity toward me and my word. And so not only do I sentence you to a life of pain and misery on earth, but also an eternity of pain and misery, without anything to call your own, in hell.”

That’s not what God did. He didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but to save the world through him. He sent his Son to rescue us from the earthbound life we heard Solomon describe earlier, where we can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in our work, only to eventually die and leave behind everything we own to someone who might manage it well or fritter it all away. He came to give our lives meaning and hope and purpose beyond the heavens by paying off our debt to God completely and reconciling us with him. He came to win for us an inheritance and treasures untold in heaven.

Then, on top of that, he doesn’t just drag us through life with the bare minimum on our way to heaven, which still would be far more than we deserve. No, as we confess with Martin Luther in the meaning to the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, he *richly and daily* provides us with clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all we own, and all that we need to keep our body and life.

Jesus also changes our hearts so that we become rich toward God in the next section of Luke, which will serve as the Gospel next Sunday. There he reminds us that just as he feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies, so he will feed and clothe us all the more richly, since we are worth far more to him. After all, he did not shed his blood for the birds or the flowers, but for us humans.

Yes, friends, whether times are thin or thick, whether you’ve been griping or celebrating, God has been extremely rich toward you, and you have no reason not to be rich toward him. God has given up his life for you, and you have no reason not to live for him. God knows you can’t find true and ultimate happiness in any of your stuff, and so he gives you true happiness and peace in him and in his promises. What can the god of Stuff give you that the true God can’t give you in infinitely better quality and quantity, both here on earth but especially and eternally in heaven?

Guard against greed. Your life isn’t in your stuff and how much of it you have. Your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, makes his appearance, then you also will appear with him in glory. There’s no need always to be after more, when you already have the most and the best in him. Amen.