

This Gospel story always haunts me. “Don’t be greedy, don’t be hoarding all that stuff...” Uffda! As a person who saves money for retirement, I feel convicted. As a guitarist with perhaps a few too many guitars, I feel convicted. I’m exactly that greedy person Jesus is talking about! Perhaps you are too....

There are two questions I’d like to wrestle with today. The first question deals with greed. What is it? Why is Jesus always taking aim at us rich people? The second question deals with the other side of that coin, what does it mean to be rich toward God? What does that look like?

Jesus says “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Covetousness... Those wants and desires, those passions for stuff... I talked about this a little last week... Covetousness may be one of the biggest concerns of the Ten Commandments.

Greed is simple idolatry; and this is at the heart of the first commandment “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me.” Greed turns stuff into things we worship. Things like money, or cars, or motorcycles, or guitars... Greed turns us into Scrooge. We become miserly... Greed turns us inward, and we lose concern for others.

Covetousness and greed go hand in hand, and they have their roots in the human passion of desire. All that stuff that we want and somehow gotta have... And let’s not forget the ninth and tenth commandments – both speak of covetousness “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbors’ house or spouse or many, many, many other things...”

Quick story... When I was in high school, playing guitar was my life and passion. I played in a lot of little bands... So of course, all my friends were somehow involved with music. And we were always talking about songs and musicians. We would talk about our favorite bands, favorite guitarists, and things like that.

There was always a debate about who was the greatest guitarist in the world... For me, it was Eric Clapton. I idolized Clapton. I remember a scene in the movie *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and the image is permanently burned into my memory, where Clapton is playing a gold top Les Paul Deluxe guitar, and man-o-man, I had to have one. Badly...

And it was very helpful that I worked in a music store... The manager gave me a great deal... Mine was a heritage cherry sunburst... And I loved that guitar...

Mimetic theory is something I like to talk about, and it's something you're starting to understand... It's a simple idea with huge ramifications. It's the idea that we imitate each other. Monkey see, Monkey do. We not only learn by imitating others, we also come to our wants and desires by imitating others' wants and desires.

Advertisers know this... You remember the slogan, Be Like Mike – Buy Nike Shoes... Well, for me, when I was young, it was about being like Clapton... I had to have a guitar like his...

We not only covet things; we also covet ideologies... Things like political philosophy, or religious tradition... All this wanting and coveting, and desiring leads to rivalry and conflict with one another.

For example, Republicans and Democrats... both desire their particular political ideology and candidates... Problem is... they dislike each other so much they can't work together. And our country suffers, not so much because of their philosophy, but because of their *rivalry* with each other. And because of their greed to have more and more power.

Another face of greed is hoarding. In the game of monopoly, what happens when one person has all the properties and all the hotels? The game grinds to a halt. Right! There is one winner and everyone else is a loser. Not good for the community...

And how much of what we desire is enough? Greed can become a demon... Truth is, it's never enough! We can never have enough money... I can never have enough guitars... Republicans and democrats can never have enough power... Do you see the problems?

It seems so simple, and yet it is so complicated. All of our covetousness, all the hoarding, all our competing wants and desires, all the jealousies, all the blaming and game playing, all the finger pointing, ... can really destroy our communities. And we are in bondage to this stuff!

Jesus knows we are creatures of desire, and Jesus didn't come so that we might stop desiring, but rather that we might desire to be like Christ; to imitate Jesus. Or as our gospel reading calls it-- being rich toward God.

In our gospel lesson, the rich fool dies in the throes of his desire for possessions. The parable says that the man is not condemned, but rather foolish... The Greek

word translated as fool really means “wrong mind”. In other words, he simply misplaced the passion that would feed his soul.

I recently read Eric Clapton’s autobiography. Imagine... I loved reading how he learned to play guitar, I loved how he started buying lots and lots of guitars, I found myself jealous of his guitar playing success, I found myself shocked and appalled by his addictions, all his broken relationships. I couldn’t put it down...

And I couldn’t believe how truthful and honest he was—amazingly genuine and sincere. And surprisingly, in the midst of his completely shattered life, there was also a story of resurrection. I didn’t expect it...

In ‘87 Clapton collapsed at a concert in Madison Wisconsin. His manager did some homework and checked him into the best drug and rehab program in the world. A little place in Minnesota north of the cities. Clapton described his experiences there in detail.

He was eventually released and stayed sober for a couple months. But as he re-entered his life, his old friends remained the same, and he started drinking again. He thought he could handle it... But Nope...

He entered Hazelton a second time completely broken and utterly on his knees. He describes a moment when he finally realized he couldn’t do it on his own and needed help. He got on his knees and prayed. He said he’s prayed every day since then... He was very pragmatic about it. When asked why he prays, he just says, “Because it works.” No other reason...

Clapton eventually remarried and had a family. He also got involved with building a drug and rehab program in the Caribbean called The Crossroads. As a way to pay for the construction of the facility, he sold a hundred of his guitars at auction. One of them was a much-loved Fender Strat named “Brownie.” Which sold for nearly half a million dollars. So, apparently, I’m not the only one who has coveted his guitars...

The auction was a tremendous success and raised over two million dollars. Clapton then organized a guitar festival featuring some of the most successful guitarists in the world. He gave away more of his personal guitars to be auctioned off and convinced other performers to do the same.

At the second auction, the top selling guitar was his Fender Strat named “Blackie.” Which sold for nearly a million dollars. All this money went to support the Crossroads Drug and Alcohol Treatment Program. It was all about giving back—doing what he could to help others.

When I was reading all this, I was shocked and I thought, “Wow, this is what it looks like to be rich toward God.” To be loving, kind, and generous... And now I not only want to play guitar like him, I also want to be like Jesus and be generous like him.

And when you think about it, the new Clapton really isn’t so much different than a lot of us. As I visit people, I often see this same kind of love and generosity. As we get older, we often begin giving our possessions away. We downsize, we give things to our kids, and we want to give back... We give money to church and our community. Transformation happens...

Now let's be honest, there a little bit of that rich fool in all of us, isn't there? But we also give witness to the miracle that does happen as we become rich toward God, and let's remember this is God's miracle. And this is the good news for today. God doesn't love us if we change; God loves us so that we can change. Do you see the difference?

God rains blessings upon us in so many ways; our life is a gift from God, our families, our friends, our faith, our work... We might be rich fools, but God loves us even more than we can possibly imagine. And that makes us, completely indebted, and spiritually rich beyond imagination.

Amen.