

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
THE TOXICITY OF GREED
LUKE 12:13-21
August 1, 2010
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

The solution to greed is not poverty. The poor may be even greedier for money than the rich. The solution to greed is gratitude and generosity. Our challenge as Christians is to share our possessions with those in need.

Jesus warned against greed, because money does not bring happiness. Jesus told a parable of a man so dedicated to amassing wealth that he died as he was tearing down his barns to build bigger ones. It all became useless to him when he died.

The major religions all warn against greed and the seductions of wealth. Yet overestimating the importance of money is a universal failing. Because of the high value we place on money, we keep what we've made and reach for more. This is the real evil of money, it promotes acquisitiveness and selfishness.

Science fiction movies have repeatedly made use of a favorite theme: the unprecedented threat. UFOs threaten to destroy Earth! Creatures from subterranean depths attack a typical American town! A mysterious and deadly virus invades New York City! Invariably, a supernatural evil from an unidentified source threatens thousands of lives. The only hope is that a team of brilliant scientists, which includes a beautiful female scientist and a handsome, young male scientist, will come up with magnificent, save-the-day

solution. Fortunately, they always do. We have sometimes wondered how far-fetched this scenario is. Could something like this really happen?

Cultural moods can become so pervasive that they become almost invisible. Look around. What has caused the corporate scandals that are a national disgrace? Why are we losing the middle class, as the rich get richer and the poor poorer? How is it that so many people have no health insurance, while health insurance companies report unprecedented profits? Whence comes the obscenity of CEOs being compensated at a ratio of 500 to 1 over their workers? Why do the costs of war escalate beyond both reason and control? What feeds the epidemic of cheating that infects every level of society, destroying trust and making security impossible? How is it that we remain dissatisfied and restless, no matter how much we have?

The answer is greed. Can anyone dispute the claim that greed is the most serious spiritual problem in our culture? Greed leads political figures, business executives, and religious leaders into reckless acts of over-reaching and dishonesty. Greed creates unhealthy stress and ruthless competition in the workplace, and causes unbearable strains and tensions at home. Greed is responsible for the success of mega-stores that take advantage of the poor through low wages while providing bargains for affluent suburbanites. Greed propels the expansion of illegal drug use, exploits the vast enthusiasm for sports and entertainment celebrities, and generates scam artists who prey on the elderly. Greed entices both young and old to line up for lottery tickets against overwhelming odds and to take other kinds of risks they would ordinarily not consider. Greed is involved in most murders and in all thefts. It is an infectious disease that touches all of us and will destroy vast numbers of us.

Jesus told a parable about greed that sounds very contemporary. We would all agree that poverty is a tragic condition, that people are justified in seeking enough of life's goods to find at least minimal happiness. We understand when someone like the man in Jesus' parable says, "All I want is to make enough money to provide happiness and security for my family." Surely there is nothing wrong with that. So he is successful, and he finds great satisfaction in being able to provide his family with certain things they never had before. As he thinks about it, however, he realizes that his children will need to go to college, and college costs are soaring. "I don't have enough," he says. So he makes more, and is successful beyond his wildest dreams. "But," he thinks, "what will I do if the locusts come and destroy everything, or if

years of famine come? I don't have enough." Ultimately, this man tears down the buildings where he has stored his wealth so he can build larger buildings. But he cannot accumulate enough to purchase immortality. *"This night,"* comes the word of judgment, *"your life will be required of you. Then who will all this belong to?"*

Greed is a deadly sin. It has a narcotic quality. More is never enough. A Texas rancher says, "I'm not greedy. All I want is the land next to mine." If he is successful, and lives long enough, he could end up owning the whole world. The question is, would the whole world be enough?

Sin is duplicitous. Greed's deception is that it convinces its victim that possessing more and more is the way to find satisfaction. The obsessive nature of greed, however, allows for no satisfaction. Alcoholics and addicts are convinced that they need the very poison that is killing them. Greed is no different. Like a parasite, greed eventually destroys its host. Sin is essentially spiritual. Sin is a spiritual illness or disease. Greed is so pervasive in our culture that it is like a plague. What can we do to escape its domination? Is there an antibiotic to offset the destructive power of greed?

Before answering, consider this from the growing field of brain research. According to Kathleen McGowan, in *Discover Magazine*, brain scans are shedding new light on good and bad human behavior. One recent finding from neuro-imaging suggests that acting virtuously is its own reward. Altruistic behavior sends reward-related brain systems into a pleasurable tizzy - - even more so than the prospect of self-interested gain. "The big punch line is that all things being equal, your reward system fires off a lot more when you're giving than when you're taking," says Jordan Grafman, National Institute of Neurological Disorders. Being good feels better than being wicked!

The antidote to greed is gratitude. Greed is thoroughly self-oriented, repeatedly insisting, "I want!" In greed the focus is on what I get and possess for myself. Gratitude is focused less on oneself and more on the source of life's goodness and life's gifts. Biblical faith rests largely on gratitude. We know the One from whom comes life, truth, and meaning. How can we not be grateful? In gratitude we can escape the menace of greed.

The proverb *"All that glitters is not gold"* has been applied to everything but money. We are suspicious of deals that are too good to be true. We are

philosophical about relationships that fall short of perfection. We take consolation in discovering that we've been misled. But we seldom question the glitter that surrounds wealth even though we have ample evidence that money can't buy happiness.

If you are looking for contentment in your life that will bring you greater joy than all the wealth of the world, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.