

SM040 – On Guard Against Greed

Jesus' popularity was reaching its height. He had performed miracle after miracle, in acts of mercy toward people, and taught them the way of the kingdom of God. He had healed the sick – who can forget the woman who had the severe problem with bleeding, had spent her entire livelihood on doctors and was no better for it. She was ostracized from her family and society by her condition, but when she touched Jesus, she was healed and restored to her family and community.

He had cast out evil spirits. Who can forget the man whose little boy was afflicted with an evil spirit and that the spirit often tried to cause the boy to kill himself. Jesus had mercy upon this family and cast the spirit out, restoring the son to his father.

He had forgiven sinners. Who can forget the woman, the immoral woman, who was touched by the words of Jesus and who washed his feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and anointed them with her precious, costly oil.

These things were not easily forgotten by the multitudes and they thronged to his side to hear him speak and to watch him heal. But these things were also not easily forgotten by the religious leaders who increasingly despised him. Jesus was acting on his own authority, they said, and was not following the official and proper religious channels.

One day they invited him to lunch, and while the religious leaders meticulously washed themselves before the meal so they would be clean before God, Jesus didn't. The Pharisees could not believe that Jesus had not gone through the elaborate rituals that every religious man went through. But Jesus said to them,

You Pharisees are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and wickedness! ⁴⁰ Fools! Didn't God make the inside as well as the outside? ⁴¹ So clean the inside by giving gifts to the poor, and you will be clean all over.

⁴² "What sorrow awaits you Pharisees! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore justice and the love of God. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.

⁴³ "What sorrow awaits you Pharisees! For you love to sit in the seats of honor in the synagogues and receive respectful greetings as you walk in the marketplaces. ⁴⁴ Yes, what sorrow awaits you! For you are like hidden graves in a field. People walk over them without knowing the corruption they are stepping on."

⁴⁵ "Teacher," said an expert in religious law, "you have insulted us, too, in what you just said."

⁴⁶ "Yes," said Jesus, "what sorrow also awaits you experts in religious law! For you crush people with unbearable religious demands, and you never lift a finger to ease the burden. ⁴⁷ What sorrow awaits you! For you build monuments for the prophets your own ancestors killed long ago. ⁴⁸ But in fact,

you stand as witnesses who agree with what your ancestors did. They killed the prophets, and you join in their crime by building the monuments!

Jesus said many other things to these religious leaders. He had to say them. He had to wake them up before it was too late. They had lost sight of the purpose of life – to bring glory to God. They had lost sight of the goal, to live compassionately and to be a light to the world.

And so while the crowds were increasing, the pressure was increasing too. One day, when many thousands of people had gathered, so many that people were even stepping on one another, Jesus said to his disciples, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees—their hypocrisy. ² The time is coming when everything that is covered up will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all. ³ Whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be shouted from the housetops for all to hear.”

The warning was well timed. With the increasing pressure from the religious leaders, it could be easy for his disciples to yield to their pressure. But such hypocrisy would be exposed. While they looked good on the outside, everything they were covering up would one day come to light. In fact, everything that people said in the dark would be heard in the light and all whispered words would be shouted from the housetops for all to hear. The Pharisees were not to be feared. Hypocrisy was to be feared. And then to reinforce this message and to encourage their hearts Jesus said to them all,

Dear friends, don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot do any more to you after that. ⁵ But I'll tell you whom to fear. Fear God, who has the power to kill you and then throw you into hell. Yes, he's the one to fear.

⁶ “What is the price of five sparrows—two copper coins? Yet God does not forget a single one of them. ⁷ And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows.

Jesus said many others things like this to encourage his people. The hearts of the disciples were lifted and the crowds who listened enjoyed these words of comfort and protection from the real spiritual dangers that faced them. They loved Jesus and they crowded around him. The real dangers were not eating a meal with hands that had not been ceremonially cleansed. The real danger was a heart unclean before God. The real danger was not the pressure or even the threat of death from the rulers. The real danger was hypocrisy and not having a heart that was right with God.

Just at that moment, as Jesus was pressing this point home for his disciples and for the crowds who surrounded him, a man was forcing his way through the crowd. He seemed impatient, angry, and the type of man who was determined to get his way.

“Make way, please. Make way. I'm trying to get to Jesus. I have a matter of great family importance to bring to his attention. Please, please, get out of my way.”

As the people parted to let this man of great self importance through, Jesus watched and prepared in his heart for what this man would say.

“Teacher, my father has died and has left the inheritance to my brother and me. But a great injustice has been done to me. I want the land to be split between us. Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. He will get his part and then I will have mine.”

In the ancient world of Israel, teachers or rabbis were more than teachers of biblical principles and spiritual laws. They were also judges of the people and would often arbitrate disputes among the people. When this man asks Jesus to get involved in his family dispute, he is asking Jesus, a recognized, but unofficial teacher to solve this family and civil dispute for him.

To someone without wisdom, this would easily have been received as flattery. Jesus was not an officially recognized rabbi, yet here was this man asking him to act as a judge in an important matter of his life. But Jesus was not about to be deceived in this situation for even though the man is crying out for justice, it is clear that something is very wrong with his request.

The man is not asking for Jesus to make a ruling. He does not say, “will you mediate this dispute, will you help us reconcile, will you help us resolve our problem,” but he asks Jesus to carry out what he has already decided. This man has already figured out what is just and he says, “tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

A father died and left his estate to his two sons who were to use it for the benefit of the entire family. They were to dwell in harmony just as Psalm 133 said, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity.” They were not to quarrel but such was not the case in this family. Quarrel they did and if one brother decided he wanted the land divided or partitioned, it should be done, the rabbis said. What would Jesus say?

Listening to such a complaint requires a sympathetic response. This man is asking for justice. It appears that something awful has happened, and it takes great courage to tell him his perspective is too narrow. All he sees is his perspective. He must learn to see life from a larger perspective.

The fact that the man is asking Jesus to side with him in the dispute rather than mediate the dispute shows that a relationship has been broken. The man does not want to dwell in the entire estate with his brother in unity. The man wants to divide the land. Jesus has not come to be a divider. He has come to be a reconciler.

Jesus was not indifferent to the man’s plight, but there was a gain greater than an inheritance and this is what he wants this man to see. There is a loss greater than losing an inheritance, and Jesus wants this man to see this as well.

And so Jesus said to him with the edge of anger in his voice, “Man, who made me a judge over you and your brother to decide such things as that?” Jesus refuses to take the side of the man. Jesus refuses to

get involved and the reason he does is that what the man says on the outside does not match what is on the inside.

The crowds are surprised at Jesus. The disciples are surprised. Here was a man crying out for justice, so it seemed. Here was a man still suffering from the trauma of losing a father. Here was a man asking for help, and Jesus refuses with a measure of anger in his voice.

But wait, had not Jesus just warned the disciples of the hypocrisy of the leaders, and had not Jesus in a face to face encounter with the leaders told them that they seemed to have things right on the outside but had it all wrong on the inside. Maybe this was the same situation, and in order that the people would have no doubt, Jesus said in a loud voice so that everyone could hear.

“Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.”

This is why Jesus answered this man as he did. The man who was crying for justice was really a greedy man. His words sounded pious on the outside, but on the inside, he was full of sin. And to make sure that everyone, including the man understood, Jesus told them a story, and when we come back, we will hear the story Jesus told.

Interlude

A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, ‘What should I do? I don’t have room for all my crops.’ Then he said, ‘I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. And I’ll sit back and say to myself, “My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!”’

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?’

The story was finished. Jesus let its implications sink in, and then he said to them all.

“Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.”

What a story and what lessons it had for the man who came to Jesus with what appeared to be a just cause but really had a heart full of greed. What a story and lessons for the disciples, for the crowds, for the religious leaders and for us. Let’s probe into this story and see what we can learn.

First, we learn that all of us must beware and be on our guard against every form of greed. And really, we must not stop there. It is not just greed. It is not just greed for land or possessions that this man wanted. People are infected with insatiable desires for many things. Possessions is one of them. Possessions are necessary for life, but the deception that approaches us all is that if we have an abundance of possessions then we will experience genuine life. But life does not come from accumulation of possessions or feeding our insatiable desires for more possessions, or more pleasure, or more power, or more prestige from others.

Jesus looked within the heart of this man. Rather than being a judge between the brothers, he is a judge over the brothers. Rather than judging about the land, he judges about the heart. And Jesus does the same with us. He peers into the depths of our hearts and seeks to expose what is corrupt and polluting – not to condemn us, but to deliver us from those things that would destroy us, and he does this because he loves us.

There is a psalm about this that Jesus and the disciples knew. It would be good for us to know it too. It is Psalm 49. Here are the first verses of it:

Listen to this, all you people!

Pay attention, everyone in the world!

² High and low,

rich and poor—listen!

³ For my words are wise,

and my thoughts are filled with insight.

⁴ I listen carefully to many proverbs

and solve riddles with inspiration from a harp.

⁵ Why should I fear when trouble comes,

when enemies surround me?

⁶ They trust in their wealth

and boast of great riches.

⁷ Yet they cannot redeem themselves from death

by paying a ransom to God.

⁸ Redemption does not come so easily,

for no one can ever pay enough

⁹ to live forever

and never see the grave.

¹⁰ Those who are wise must finally die,

just like the foolish and senseless,

leaving all their wealth behind.

¹¹ The grave is their eternal home,

where they will stay forever.

They may name their estates after themselves,

¹² but their fame will not last.

They will die, just like animals.

¹³ This is the fate of fools,

though they are remembered as being wise.

Like sheep, they are led to the grave,

where death will be their shepherd.

In the morning the godly will rule over them.

Their bodies will rot in the grave,
far from their grand estates.
15 But as for me, God will redeem my life.
He will snatch me from the power of the grave. Interlude

16 So don't be dismayed when the wicked grow rich
and their homes become ever more splendid.
17 For when they die, they take nothing with them.
Their wealth will not follow them into the grave.
18 In this life they consider themselves fortunate
and are applauded for their success.
19 But they will die like all before them
and never again see the light of day.
20 People who boast of their wealth don't understand;
they will die, just like animals.

No, we cannot take our wealth or possessions with us. Everything we make stays here. But there is something else in the parable that we must see. We must see what true wealth is.

Did you notice in the story that the man continually talked to himself, and no one else. In the ancient world of Israel, this was not the way to solve one's dilemmas. Wise men discussed matters of importance in the gate of the village with the other men. They talked and talked and talked with their friends about their situations in life, and then, after talking some more, they would finally make a decision about what course to take or how to solve a problem.

But the man in the parable did not do this. He was above all that. He was a rich man. Everything had gone so well for him in life and just when things were going well, they started getting better. His land became very productive, so productive that he had to figure out a new place to store his crops. But rather than talk with his friends and with the other village elders, he evaluated the problem within himself only. Then he came up with a solution all on his own. Then, he spoke to himself about his future life of luxury and ease. It was all about him and it was all only him. He never consulted with others which was the practice at that time in those villages. He was above it all and being above it all, he had only himself and no one else, not even God. There was no consideration for giving thanks to God, no consideration for attributing it to him, no consideration for sharing with the poor. The crops are his crops. The barns are his barns. The grain is his grain. The goods are his goods. They are his and his alone. They are for him and him alone. It was in such barns that the priests and Levites were to come and collect their tithes so they would have something to eat and live by. But this man's provisions would not be for them, or for anyone else.

If only the man in the story would have known and lived by the words that were spoken by a great follower of Jesus many years later, Ambrose, who said, "the rich man has storage available in the

mouths of the needy.” If only he had read and heeded the warning of Ecclesiastes 5:10, “Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness!”

But the man in the parable had not heeded the wise words of Solomon. He has now come to the great goal of his life and he makes a speech, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come. Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.” End of speech. No applause. No laughter. No shared joy. Why not? Because there is no one there with him. The man is alone.

The ancient Greek language has four words for fool – anoetos, mindless; asophos – without wisdom; moros – moron; aphron – fool/stupid. The last two are the strongest. And the ancient story writers of this parable used the last word “aphron” to drive a point home. When the rich man thought his many possessions produced the good life, the ancient word used to describe this was (euphron – the good life) but Jesus said this man missed the euphron because he was really an aphron – a stupid fool. It was a play on words, to drive home this piercing point.

Just when the man thought that he had everything lined up, God showed up and said, “You fool, this very night your life will be required of you.” The word **require** has the idea of life on loan. His life was a gift, just as his wealth and crops and grain and barn were all a gift. Now he comes to see, life wasn’t about him and being a self made man. But it was too late. He dies, leaves it all behind and those who were too far beneath him for him to have any kind of relationship, will take all his wealth.

The real sting is not that he dies, but that he dies and has no one to share his wealth with. He is lonely and friendless in the midst of his wealth. God does not ask, “Why did you not share?” “What have you done for others?” “Why did you not help those in need?” but “who will now own all that you have prepared for yourself?” He planned alone, built alone, indulged alone, and died alone. And he has no idea who will get all that was his.

After the story, Jesus ended with a final word of wisdom – Life is not about storing up treasures to enrich ourselves. Life is about storing up treasures as a gift to God in worship.

We are not told how the man responded, the man who came to Jesus and asked Jesus to affirm his decision to divide up the inheritance between him and his brother. Did he walk away in anger? Did he walk away in frustration? Did he try to justify himself further? We simply do not know. But what we can know is our own hearts. Beware and be on your guard against every form of insatiable desire. For even when one has an abundance, his life is not about what he has, but his life is about being rich toward God and giving worship to him.