

Many members. One body united in Christ.

Midweek Vespers  
St. Luke 12:13-21  
Greed

Beloved in the Lord,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We continue our consideration of the seven deadly or capital sins with greed. Again, they are called the capital sins because we can think of them as the drivers behind other sins. Thomas Aquinas notes that greed gives birth to such “daughter” sins as harshness, disquiet, violence, deceit, perjury, fraud, and betrayal. The aim in considering the capital sins is not to replace the Ten Commandments, but to help us see behind what we would call an actual sin and understand the disordered desires of our flesh. Again, Aquinas points out that greed is the desire to gain some exterior good at the cost of good for our soul or body. That could be money or people, power or land, cars or toys, or a host of other things. These things may be good in and of themselves but greed is a disordering of our relationship to them and the one who gives them.

Martin Chemnitz, in his commonplace on sin points out well that the capital sin that underlies them all is unbelief. When we are disordered in our relationship with God, our relationship to everything else will also be disordered. This is critical to keep in mind because only in this way can we see the grave danger of our sins. Unbelief is a rejection of God, whatever form it takes, whether greed or sloth or gluttony or anything else. Both the desire and the ensuing action if it is taken are expressions of unbelief which is a rejection of God as good or as God at all. This is what condemns us. This is why we are to fear all sin and not take any of it lightly.

In the account of the rich man before us this evening, the problem was not with the increase of the grain. It is God who grants growth and abundance. The grain was a good gift. We even pray for such things. We ask that God would cause the earth to bear an abundance of fruit. Often, when God is promising His blessing, it is described in terms of abundant crops, thriving herds and flocks, and homes full of children. These are all good gifts - so long as we are properly ordered toward them. And therein lies the problem.

The man who was blessed with the abundance took what the Lord had graciously given to him and made it his god. He was content and at ease, not because He

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trusted in the God who had given him the grain and the goods, but because he trusted in the grain and the goods. And in so doing, he neglected the needs of his soul - forgiveness and righteousness. That is why he said to his soul "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." Greed sacrifices the good of both body and soul in order to obtain things like wealth or power or things. Greed also sacrifices the duties of our vocations which means that it sacrifices the good and needs of our neighbor - our spouse, our children, our church, our friends, our community - so that we can get more of whatever earthly good we fear, love, and trust.

We probably tend to associate greed with someone who is mean and angry and only cares about money, an Ebenezer Scrooge kind of character. And while those certainly exist, we are fooling ourselves if we think that is the only way that greed operates and manifests. That is probably how we convince ourselves that we don't personally struggle with greed. But greed manifests itself in a lot of ways. Greed constantly worries about how much money is in your bank account or what the stock market is doing; greed can only understand success as bigger and more; greed keeps us at our office or on our computers to get some more work done while our family eats dinner without us and everyone goes to bed without hearing God's Word or praying; greed sacrifices rest, Holy Communion, Bible Class, physical and mental health even the well-being of others to get awards, praise, scholarships, and promotions; greed shuts our mouths when speaking the truth could cost us money or friends or lose us elections.

As Aristotle defined it, greed is the an insatiable, unjust desire to possess more than one's fair share of wealth, honor, or power. Even Aristotle, who was no Christian, understood that greed comes at the cost of others and that it will never be satisfied. The greedy person believes that he is entitled to more and even perhaps what already belongs to others. Such a person is not content until he has what he desires and even then he will desire more of it or something else.

As Christians, by God's Word, we see the evil in greed that the pagan philosophers missed. We confess that God the Father Almighty is our Creator, the one who made and sustains all things in heaven and on earth. He is the one who daily and richly provides us with all that we need to support this body and life, giving daily bread even to all evil people. He is the one who willingly and mercifully sacrificed that which was most precious to Him, His beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to save us from the temporal and eternal death that we absolutely deserve. Greed seeks to replace this God who loves you with things that moth and rust destroy and thieves can break in and steal.

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No sooner had he made his plans to tear down his barns and build bigger ones so that he could bask in the glory of his “more”, than the rich fool found himself before the judgment seat of the one who had made him and given him his “more”. What wasn’t there to save him or even help him was the “more”. The man’s god, that which he had sacrificed everything and everyone to obtain for himself, now belonged to someone else who hadn’t labored for it. The things that would have helped him before God, the true riches which endure forever - faith, Holy Baptism, forgiveness, the Body and Blood of God’s Son, repentance - these the man had despised, thinking nothing of them, imagining that he could get them later. But there was no later and without these, no matter how much lip service he may have once paid to them, the rich man was the most impoverished of all people who would now join all the greedy in the eternal fires of God’s wrath where there is no resting, no merriment, and no joy.

Do not be like the rich fool. Do not be like the man who thought that Jesus had come to ensure that we have whatever portion of earthly things that we think we are entitled to. Listen to and believe the Holy Spirit when he tells you that “those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” Do not assume that you can handle it or that St. Paul is just overstating the case. Those who have wandered away from the faith, the rich fool - they all thought the same thing. Be content with the daily bread God gave you. That is, after all, what Jesus tells us to pray for because that is what we need. Do not think that daydreaming about being rich is harmless. Do not think that the answer to your problems or your congregation’s problems or the country’s problems is more earthly anything - more money, more members, bigger buildings, more land, more influence, more control, more recognition. That is greed. That is idolatry. That is unbelief. God alone is God. God alone is good. Be rich in Him and the things of His righteousness. He will give what is needed. “There is great gain in godliness with contentment.” That is because godliness with contentment brings the peace which passes all human understanding, the peace that knows that even the little that I have is more than enough in the hands of Him who brought forth all things from nothing by the Word of His mouth, who fed thousands with five loaves of bread and two small fish, the same hands that were pierced with nails and poured out their life-giving Blood on the cross into the cup that my Savior lifts to my lips for the forgiveness of all my sins.

How then, can you prepare to confess before your pastor the greed that lies in your

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heart? The 9th and 10th Commandments, in which God forbids covetousness are essential. We must ask ourselves and honestly answer “What things in this world do I hope and trust in? Have I been discontent, anxious, or angry about something God has or hasn’t given me? What things have I sacrificed the spiritual, physical, and mental good of my family to try to get? For what have I made excuses to not be with the Lord in the Divine Service or not pray or not read God’s Word or not attend Bible Class and Sunday School?” Consider also some of the following questions taken from the confession mirror that is printed in *The Treasury of Daily Prayer* (pg. 1464-1466): Do I have strong wants, desires, or cravings that consume my thoughts? Do I resent or envy those who have more than I? Have my wants kept me from being happy with and thankful for what God has given me? Am I discontented with the spouse, the children, the house, the car, the church, or the job the Lord God has given me? Have I neglected to urge someone to remain faithful to his or her spouse?

Note the answers to those questions. Then go to your pastor and say something like “Pastor, what troubles me particularly is that I have allowed greed or covetousness to rule me by being afraid or upset when unexpected expenses come up; I have been envious of those who can afford a new car or take nice vacations; I have done what was comfortable and easy rather than what was right in God’s sight; I have chased after more and bigger rather than what is faithful; I have shown partiality toward those who I believed could personally benefit me; I have skipped church or family devotions so that I could get a bigger paycheck or be entertained or play sports.” Finish by saying “Pastor, I am sorry for all of this and ask for grace. I want to do better.” Then listen. Because what follows is the most important part of going to confession. Listen not only with your ears but also with your heart and mind as Christ Jesus tells you that He forgives you these and all your others sins. Feel the weight of your pastor’s hands as he bestows upon you the absolution of Christ and traces the sign of the Holy Cross upon your head which marks you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. God Himself is telling you that He has cast these sins behind His back. He will not judge you for them. Having heard and received these things bless the God and Father of our Savior Jesus Christ with your heart “Amen. Yes. Yes. This shall be so.”

This is why Christ died for you. This is why the day of His death is Good Friday. Because on that day, in His perfect selflessness, the Son of God acquired a treasure of eternal value, which you thought in your greed to obtain through the fleeting things of this world. On that day, the kingdom of heaven itself was opened to all of us sinners and the righteousness of God filled the font of Baptism so that it might cover the guilt of all our sin.

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May God so order our hearts toward Him that this righteousness alone be our desire and treasure, that we hunger and thirst daily for it, and that we be confidently content with the daily bread which our Heavenly Father gives for He and He alone is good and His mercy endureth forever. God grant it Jesus' sake.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.