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In a January 2012 article titled *I Love Greed*,<sup>2</sup> American economist Walter Williams asks, “What human motivation gets the most wonderful things done?” He says the answer is simple. The answer is greed. He explains himself, saying, “When I say greed, I am not talking about fraud, theft, dishonesty, lobbying for special privileges from government or other forms of despicable behavior. I’m talking about people trying to get as much as they can for themselves,” and “in order for one to get more for himself, he must serve his fellow man.”

He goes on to make his point using the example of both the Texas rancher and Idaho potato farmer. He describes how the rancher may “have to fight the cold of night, perhaps blizzards, to run down, feed and care for stray cattle. They make the personal sacrifice of caring for their animals to ensure that New Yorkers can enjoy beef.” He describes how the potato farmer may “[toil] in blazing sun, in dust and dirt, and maybe being bitten by insects to ensure that New Yorkers [have] potatoes to go with their beef.”

Williams points out that the ranchers and farmers do this, not because they care all that much about New Yorkers getting their beef and potatoes, but because they

want more for themselves. They’ve just realized that in our economy, it works better to get what you want to serve your fellow man. In other words, Williams views greed as a virtue, not a vice.

Now, as Christians, we would disagree with him. We know that greed, no matter the form, is sin. We know that greed is a denial of God’s promises and providence. But is that how we live? I think more often than we realize, the way we live our lives unintentionally proves Williams’ point and agrees with him!

Consider parents who work long hours during the week and pile on overtime or a side job on the weekend. What reason do they give for sacrificing their time with their families? They say they are doing what they feel is necessary to provide for their families—to keep their current quality of life or to improve it—to make sure their family is comfortable. We probably wouldn’t consider such sacrifices to be driven by greed, but often commend people for working so hard. We may reason that these are perfectly acceptable sacrifices.

But in much the same way we can rationalize our greed by turning it into a virtue. “I just want my kids to be happy.” “I just want to make sure I can cover

<sup>1</sup> JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for “Jesus Help”. It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

<sup>2</sup> <http://walterewilliams.com/i-love-greed/> —The idea for this introduction, and a good many thoughts were gleaned from a sermon by Pastor Christopher Koschnitzke (St. John, Waterloo, WI) which he wrote for our 2013 WLS Summer Quarter course *Preaching In A Post-Modern World*.

most of my child's college education." "I don't want to have to worry about living from paycheck to paycheck." "I want to be able to live comfortably in retirement." Friends, understand that in and of themselves, there is nothing at all wrong with these things. They *can* be noble pursuits. They *can* be actions worthy of sacrifice on our part. But today Jesus challenges our rationalizations by warning us about how destructive greed can be in our lives. Today our Lord Jesus calls on us to consider THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR PRIORITIES.

Jesus gives a very stern warning, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions!" And to make his point painfully clear he tells this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store **my** crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down **my** barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all **my** grain and **my** goods. And I'll say to **myself**, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

When you first consider this farmer, you might think, "Wow! Good for him! A smart and successful farmer!" But maybe what you keep hidden in your heart is the same thing that lurks whenever you

see someone blessed with more earthly wealth than you: "Why can't that be me?" But just as soon as you think that, Jesus comes smashing you upside the head as his parable continues: "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'"

You can't help but ask: "Why, Jesus? This man wasn't a rascal! He didn't cheat and connive to get all that abundance! You blessed him with it! Why is he a fool? Why does his life have to be taken from him? What did he do wrong?"



Jesus responds, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

The world would praise this farmer as shrewd, wise and successful. In fact, the world would say that economically, he's reached the goal for which every person in a free market society strives—to acquire enough wealth for himself so he can live comfortably the rest of his days and not have to worry about being a burden on anyone else. But God calls him a fool.

Look back at this man's conversation with himself. Do you notice what's missing? God is missing! It's a love song to himself and what he's done! Out of the whole 64 words he speaks, all 12

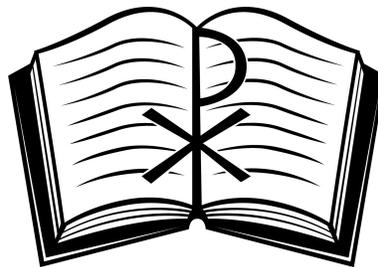
pronouns are about himself! Even though all his skills, the abundance of his possessions and even his very life are all gifts on loan from God, there isn't even an obligatory shout-out to God! Then he summarizes his greed saying, "Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But do you notice what he leaves out of that ancient frivolous phrase which is a perversion of Solomon's words from Ecclesiastes? "...for tomorrow we die."

Now, as far as I know, none of you have amassed so much wealth that you've done exactly what this farmer did. So does that mean Jesus isn't talking to you today? Do you get a free pass? No. Not at all. You see, friends, the problem wasn't the man's wealth. The problem was the man's priorities. This isn't just a wealthy person's problem, this is a human race problem.

Simply consider your own economic status right now and your current income. What are your priorities with that income? Are your first thoughts to store it up for yourself, or to be rich toward God? Is it making sure daily expenses are taken care of, and then scraping together what's left over and giving that to God, or is giving to God the first thing on your list of priorities in the management of your money? Or even think about your attitude when it comes to getting your offering ready. Is it a joy

and delight for you to participate in this act of worship and thanksgiving for all God has given you, or is it stained with pain and regret, thinking of what else you could have done with that money?

All too often we act just like this farmer. All too often we forget that all that we are and have are all gifts on loan from God. And in so doing, friends, we're risking hearing the same judgment at the end of our lives: "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"



Friends, consider the **consequences of your priorities!** Greed of all sorts needs to be killed in your lives before it kills you and your faith!

And you see, friends, the wonderful thing about our God is that his priorities are always in order. And you know what's at the top of his priorities? It's you! All of God's priorities are working so that in the end he won't have to call you a fool! God has proven that we are at the top of his priorities by giving us his firstfruits—his only Son, Jesus our Savior.

Unlike us, Jesus always guarded himself against every kind of greed, even though he often endured great poverty. He didn't even have a home of his own! (Lk. 9:58) By doing this and all things perfectly, Jesus was able to give us our greatest

treasure—his life in exchange for ours! That means that the impossible debt of our sin has been forgiven. Yes, even when the sin of greed has tainted your offerings, that too is forgiven! That means that we now have a reservation in the mansion he has prepared for us in heaven, and that reservation has no terms or conditions on our part because they've all been met by Christ!

Now knowing that ultimate and eternal riches are already ours in Christ Jesus, we are set free from all sins, even greed. He did this so that we could gladly obey the Lord's command to "set [our] minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Col. 3:2). All this changes our priorities when it comes to our wealth, possessions and even our very lives. It sets our priorities to put God and others first in our lives, and the consequences of such priorities are beautiful. Not only are we expressing true thanksgiving to our God, but we get to be a blessing to others, physically and spiritually.

There's an often quoted statement ascribed to all kinds of people. Whoever said it doesn't matter because what it says is true. *Wealth is like manure. You pile it up and it stinks. You spread it out and it makes things grow.* So, how are we to use our wealth? Our first priority is giving our firstfruits to the Lord. We spread our wealth in our congregation and through

our church body so that the gospel may continue to spread and grow in our community, in our nation and even around the world! Then we also seek ways to help and serve others, both out of love for Christ and in the hopes to gain us an opportunity to share with them the greatest and eternal riches found through faith in Christ.

Friends, especially living in America as richly blessed as we are, it can be very easy for us to fall into the same trap that glorifies greed like Mr. Williams in the article I referenced. It's so very easy for us to get our priorities all mixed up. Recognize the consequences of such priorities. It endangers your eternal life. In addition to that, thank God for his priorities! He put you first, and still does to this day. The consequences of God's priorities results in the forgiveness of your sins and the promise that eternal priceless blessings are yours in heaven. Friends, recognize your earthly blessings for what they are—gifts that God has given on loan—gifts he gives to be used in service to him. Cling to the riches given to you by faith, riches that are not on loan but are given as an eternal possession. Amen.

SDG<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.