

## **Luke 12:13-21**

Pentecost 8 + Proper 13 + August 5, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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On Covetousness

The Word of the Lord from Luke 12: Jesus said, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” This is the Word of the Lord.

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

If the rich man in the parable is right, we are doing church all wrong: we should get rid of the Divine Service and move straight to an every-Sunday potluck.

In some ways, the rich man isn’t foolish at all: his land produces abundant crops, and he doesn’t want the harvest to go to waste. If his storehouses can’t hold the abundance, it only makes sense to build a bigger barn, right? So far, so good. However, his foolishness becomes apparent when he says, “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

Here’s the foolishness: When the rich man speaks of his soul, he’s speaking of everything except his soul. To him, all is well because he has food and drink for his body, and his abundance gives him peace of mind. In fact, it gives him opportunity to relax and be merry while everybody else is working for the weekend.

I’m all for food and drink, because they’re God’s gifts to nourish the body. I’m all for relaxation and merriment, because God provides such things for mental and emotional wellbeing. But God gives different gifts for different purposes. A leisurely dinner with friends may do much for mental, emotional and physical wellbeing, but none of this nourishes the soul; if it did, as I said, we should be skipping the Divine Service and just have a potluck every Sunday, with joyous music and dancing. Just think how the church would grow in numbers if Sunday “worship” was about cheeseburgers, cheesecake and Cheetos.

We keep the Divine Service, though; and it’s a sign of the sinful nature that we tend to think of it as this hoop that God makes us jump through in order to stay on His good side. This is a feast – a feast for the soul! Here God nourishes you with His Word of grace and life. Here He feeds you with the bread of life, with His Son’s own body and blood. Think of your favorite meal and your “happy place,” if you’ve got one; if I imagine that, I’m sitting next to a crystal-clear trout stream, confronted by an aged steak and a fine cabernet. As good as that might be for my mind and stomach, what happens here every Sunday is far better for my soul – and for your soul too. The problem is that you know this by faith: you can feel a full stomach and a fret-free mind, but you can’t feel your soul.

Because of that, the rich fool’s foolishness comes easy to you as well. You’re tempted to believe that all is well with your soul when your body, mind and emotions are feeling good. But that’s like saying, “Because my dog is healthy, my cat must be well fed.” It’s apples and oranges. It’s foolish to confuse your soul with the rest of you, but it’s an attractive temptation: why do you think so many churches have turned the Gospel of Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins into a different gospel about mental, physical and emotional wellbeing?

So Jesus warns, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

Covetousness is the desire for what you do not have. It is the vice that wars against the virtue of contentment: rather than rejoice in what God has given, it wants what He has not given. Covetousness breeds all sorts of other sins. It moves the heart to thanklessness, because it accuses God of holding out. It incites resentment against those who have what you do not. It discourages charity because it persuades you that you don’t want to lose what you’ve got. It ruins relationships because it pursues things at the expense of people. It enslaves you to the commercialism of your time that says you’ve just got to have the latest and greatest product. It destroys what God created you to be, for He made you to give and to love and to serve, not to acquire and to hoard and to throw elbows. Instead of making a god out of things you have, which is bad enough, it makes a god out of things you *lack*, and that’s just plain silly.

Worse yet, covetousness demeans the sacrifice of Jesus, because it says that gaining more stuff is far more important than the shedding of His blood for your salvation.

Covetousness can even make a mess of things that you rightfully expect to acquire. It’s worth noting that the impetus for this parable is a man who says to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Be on your guard: I’ve seen families destroyed over inheritances, where none of them ever anticipated a problem; yet the family fell apart because individuals valued things over people. If covetousness can make you reject flesh-and-blood family that you can see, you can be certain that it can also break you off from the family of God.

You’d think that, compared to Jesus’ 1<sup>st</sup>-century hearers, you wouldn’t need a warning about covetousness: you’d think that they’d be tempted to covet because most of them would have so very little, whereas you have so much stuff: where we might not build bigger barns, we often rent storage units. If you have so much stuff, why is coveting still an issue? It’s not like you need more. In part, it is because the sinful nature always wants more. In part, it’s also because coveting isn’t just about getting stuff, but about trying to fill a void. It might seek to fill the void left by a broken relationship or a difficult upbringing. It might be an absence of trust that God will provide. It might just be that restless feeling that you’re *missing something*, so acquiring more stuff will either fill the hole or distract you from it.

Ultimately, the problem is that the something that you’re missing is righteousness before God. This is the foolishness of the rich fool. On the one hand, it is foolish that he believes that food and drink will nourish his soul and make him holy before God. On the other hand, it is far more foolish that the Lord who has given him so much abundance is also freely offering forgiveness, life and salvation – and the rich fool sees no need for it!

For him and for you, the Lord’s warning rings clear: “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” And, “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” Sooner or later, the Lord will say to you, “It is time for your soul to be delivered from this world; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” The answer: Not yours, that’s for sure. Don’t be a fool.

Beware the sin of covetousness. It’s not wrong to have things, as long as they do not become an idol. It’s not even wrong to make goals and desire things you don’t have, as long as you can do so without sin. There’s the rub, of course; because covetousness is always with you.

As long as covetousness is with you, view it rightly. Know that you're trying to fill a void that cannot be filled with things; and whatever other wants you're trying to fill, the one that your sinful nature seeks to satisfy with things is the absence of righteousness. When you find yourself coveting, admit the void. Confess it, and instead of trying to fill it with the latest thingy, rejoice in this: as St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich."

The Lord does not covet things. After all, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1), so all that you have is what He has entrusted to you for your stewardship. He covets something else instead: He covets your soul. His coveting is a holy desire for your salvation, that you who were lost in sin might be restored to everlasting life. You are the harvest that He gathers into His barn, while the chaff is burned with unquenchable fire. You are the treasure that He lays up for Himself: He has become poor and gone the way of the cross to die for your sins, so that you might be rich in grace toward God.

In other words, your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions, all of which fade, fray, break, rot and decay. Your life consists of Christ's life, for in Holy Baptism, He has joined you to His death and resurrection – just as He has done for Astrid Anne today. For now, He continues to feed you with His Word and His Supper. He calls you to repentance and gathers you to the feast of this Divine Service so that your faith might be strengthened and your sins forgiven.

Flee from covetousness, with the damaging sins and false comfort it brings. Rejoice in Jesus, who feeds and restores your soul. For His sake, on the day that your soul is required of you, God will not call you a fool. He will call you His holy, beloved child, because your life is found in Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.