

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Focused*

Service Theme: *Focused Living Properly Values Earthly Wealth*

Sermon Theme: All Set (July 31, 2022)

Luke 12:13-21

I heard a story recently about a WELS pastor who served as a missionary in Africa. While there, he was frustrated and baffled that so many African Christians still struggled with witchcraft. He thought to himself, “How can Christians struggle so much with something as obviously sinful as witchcraft?” Years later, the missionary accompanied a native African pastor to a conference in the U.S. While there, the African pastor lamented to the missionary, “Everyone in America has so much stuff, but they always want more! How can Christians struggle so much with something as obviously sinful as greed?”

It hit the missionary like a ton of bricks. The African Christians struggled so much with witchcraft, because in Africa, witchcraft was a cultural blind spot—something that so inundated their culture and daily lives that most people had become blind to the spiritual dangers of it. The African pastor’s lament helped the missionary to realize that American Christians struggle so much with greed, because in America, greed is a cultural blind spot!

Just think how inundated our culture is with the insatiable desire for more-- more wealth, and more stuff. Did you know there are currently over 50,000 storage facilities in the United States? Shockingly, that’s only about 170 fewer storage facilities than the combined number of Starbucks, McDonald’s, Dunkin’ Donuts, Pizza Huts, and Wendy’s! And because we have so much stuff that our homes and garages can’t hold it all, those storage facilities are full.

Or consider that through the first quarter of 2022, Americans have racked up \$841 billion in credit card debt, nearly \$400 billion more than 20 years ago. The average Floridian has \$7,049 in credit card debt, the 7th highest rate in the U.S. Why? Because people’s insatiable desire for more, bigger, or better leads them to spend above their means, paying with credit cards they aren’t capable of paying off.

Or think about the messaging of advertisements. “If you want to be cool, beautiful, influential, or happy like these people—you need to buy this!” And it works! People greedily buy more and more stuff, hoping an abundance of possessions will make them happy, fulfilled, and satisfied.

And day after day, so many of us don’t see it. That’s why we need to heed Jesus’ warning, ***“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”*** But greed isn’t just a modern American problem. Jesus first gave that warning to a Jewish crowd in his day.

With thousands of people trampling each other to hear him, Jesus taught about the importance of focusing on spiritual matters, instead of just worrying about physical matters. He gave weighty warnings like, ***“Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body...fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell.”***

But as Jesus taught them this, some guy in the crowd calls out, ***“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”*** He called Jesus “teacher,” but he obviously wasn’t listening to Jesus’ lesson! It would be like if I preached a sermon on the importance of marriage, and immediately after I said “Amen,” you shouted out, “Can you recommend a good divorce lawyer?” He completely missed Jesus’ point!

That doesn’t mean he didn’t have a valid argument. Maybe his brother really was cheating him out of his share of the inheritance. But his words revealed his true goal. He didn’t ask Jesus to help them

peacefully resolve their conflict and mend their relationship. Basically, he told Jesus, “Just get me my money!” And as that greedy demand still hung in the air, Jesus warns, **“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.”**

As he often did, Jesus used a parable to explain the spiritual dangers of greed. He shows us a rich farmer who was blessed with a substantial bumper crop, more than he could store in his current barns. So he formulated a plan. **“This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain.”**

Let’s evaluate this rich man. Has he done anything sinful so far? Is it wrong to be wealthy, or to have an abundant harvest? Of course not! It’s God who blesses people with earthly wealth, and there are many Biblical examples of rich people who faithfully followed God— people like Abraham, Jacob, King David, and King Solomon. It’s not sinful to have earthly wealth.

Was it wrong for the rich man to tear down his old barns and build bigger ones to store his surplus grain? Of course not. It’s like how God directed Joseph to store away grain during the 7 plentiful years in Egypt! Likewise, it’s not wrong to put away money for college, or hire a financial planner to help you better plan and prepare for retirement. It’s not wrong to invest in the market to maximize your assets. It’s not wrong to work hard to earn a promotion and a raise. Again, it’s not sinful to have earthly wealth, or to even gain more earthly wealth for yourself! So where’s the problem?

What the rich man says next gives us a glimpse into his heart. And we find a number of heart defects. It comes down to how you view your earthly wealth. First, notice who he focuses on. Open to the Gospel on p. 9. In verses 17-19 of the Gospel, circle every time he says “I” or “my.” In just 3 verses, he says I, my, or myself 10 times! But not once does he thank God or acknowledge that these blessings are from him. Not once does he consider how he might use his wealth to meet the

needs of others, or to be rich towards God. That’s one of the dangers of greed. It easily makes us self-focused, prideful, and selfish!

Second, notice what he thinks his earthly wealth will do for him. The rich man says, **“And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”** In English, it sounds like the guy’s just talking out loud to himself. But the Greek gives us a fascinating insight. Literally he says, “And I’ll say to my **ψυχή**.” Your ψυχή is your soul; your life; that which is the very epitome of who you are. And what does he say to his soul? Basically, “I’m all set!”

He found a sense of security in his wealth, in the abundance of his possessions that made him feel like his life was complete; that he had everything he needed. With newly built larger barns overflowing with grain, he assumed he could now live out the rest of his days, continually happy and taking life easy while he ate, drank, and enjoyed life. What else could he need?

That’s the American dream, isn’t it? That’s what so many people are chasing! To have so much wealth, and so many possessions that we’re set for life. Have you ever thought something like, “If I can just make this much, then I’m all set.” “If I can be promoted to the management level, then I’m all set.” “If I have a big house, a nice car, a boat, and a vacation home, then I’m all set.” “If I can retire early and travel the world, then I’m all set.” Again, don’t misunderstand. It’s not wrong to have those things! But if earthly wealth is what you consider the source of your security, identity, or significance; if earthly wealth makes you feel like you’re all set, there’s a problem.

Because you’re seeking security from something that is entirely insecure! Because earthly wealth and possessions are temporary. Fleeting. Fragile. One investment gone wrong. One bad business decision. One market crash. One convincing con. One boss that moves in a different direction. One of the Joneses that you can’t keep up

with. And suddenly, your security is sunk, your significance shattered, and your identity imploded.

And as Jesus closes the parable, we see the ultimate reason earthly wealth and possessions can only give you a false sense of security. God says to the rich man, ***“You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”*** The inevitable reality of death means that even if earthly wealth makes you feel secure every day of your life, eventually your life will end. And then, that which meant everything to you becomes totally worthless! The rich man thought he was all set because of his earthly wealth. He didn’t realize he wouldn’t even make it through the night.

Like Solomon said in Ecclesiastes, ***“I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.”*** When Jesus concluded his parable, I wonder if the man who told Jesus to get him his share of the inheritance came to the sober realization that, even if he got his share of the earthly wealth, someday, people would also be striving to get their share of his?

Jesus certainly warns against greed because it’s immoral. It’s a 1st commandment issue, an idol people often love and trust in more than God. And Paul includes greed in the list of the sins that exclude people from the kingdom of God in 1 Corinthians 6. But on top of being immoral, greed fails miserably to fill the holes in our heart that ache for lasting, certain security. As Jesus says, our life isn’t filled by an abundance of possessions. So, what can fill our hearts and lives?

Or, viewed from the opposite angle, how do we get the greed and false security from earthly wealth out of our hearts? Well, how do you get the air out of a cup? You can turn it over, pour it out, or blow into it—but the air will still be there. The only way to get the air out of the cup is to pour some sort of liquid into it...to fill it with something else. Likewise, the only way we can drive greediness and false security out of our lives, is if we’re filled with something else.

Or, rather, someone else! Jesus warns, “Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” In Colossians, Paul tells us what our life does consist of-- ***“Christ...is your life.”*** Your identity, significance, and security in life isn’t about how much stuff you own, or how high you’ve climbed the corporate ladder, or how full your bank account is. Your life is all about Christ, and how secure you are in him! Only with Christ can you say, “I’m all set!” and know you’re 100% secure!

Your security isn’t found in how rich you are, but in how rich Christ has been to you! As Paul writes as 2 Corinthians, ***“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich.”*** You’re eternally secure because the Son of God, to whom all things belong, became physically poor, becoming the Son of Man, who didn’t even own a place to lay his head. More importantly, he became spiritually poor. Although he was perfectly rich in righteousness, he became spiritually poor—taking on himself all of the greediness, self-focus, and self-reliance of the whole world. He took all of it to the cross, and there he fully paid off a debt far greater than even \$841 billion. He paid the debt of the world’s sin, a debt so insurmountable, that only the death of the Son of God could pay it off. And through faith in him who became poor for you, you have the infinite, eternal wealth of heaven!

And that gives us a completely focused perspective on earthly wealth. It’s a gift from God to praise him for. A gift from God we can use to be rich toward him, and to care for the needs of others. A gift from God that we can use to help the good news of the Gospel spread! And filled with Christ, you have a security that can’t be shaken by recession, bankruptcy, or identity theft. When you’re filled with Christ, whether your barns are overflowing with a bumper crop, or completely empty; whether you’ve got decades left to live, or if your life will be demanded of you tonight—when your security is found in Christ, then you can always say, “All set!” Because of the rich one who became poor, so that you can be rich for eternity!