

## **“What Do We Do About Greed?”**

*Reading: 2 Kings 20:1-6, 12-19; Colossians 3:1-17*

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If I were to ask you what word you associate with King Solomon, you would probably say, “wisdom.” If I said “King David,” maybe you would say “Goliath” or “a man after God’s own heart.” If you paid attention in history class, when I say “King Richard” you might say “the Lionheart.” Or “King Henry VIII” might make you think, “six wives.” But when I say, “King Midas,” I bet the first thing that comes to mind will be “gold.” A lot of famous people in history get associated with one or two things, sometimes legendary, and that person becomes an example to us of either that virtue or that vice. And in the case of King Midas, he has been the example through the ages of someone enthralled by greed.

The real King Midas lived so long ago, if he lived at all, that there are a variety of stories told about him, but the basic myth is that he was given a wish by a god or demigod as a reward, and his wish was that whatever he touched would turn to gold. Instant, unlimited wealth; who wouldn’t want that? The problem, as I’m sure you’ve realized if you don’t already know the story, is that you have to touch your food to eat it, but you can’t eat gold. And in some versions of the story, Midas accidentally touched his daughter, and she turned to gold, too, and the moral of the story is that his greed was a terrible curse. Or, put another way, be careful what you wish for.

The issue is greed. The most obvious definition of greed is a lust for wealth; we usually think of greed in connection to money or possessions. But in a broader sense, greed is really not that much different than pride, or gluttony, or lusting for power, or sexual lust. We might distinguish between them based on what specifically you are greedy for, but in a general sense they’re very much the same. Greed is setting your heart on something less, something unworthy, something that reduces your humanity. If you’re greedy for money or sex, that dehumanizes you a bit, it makes you more like an animal, it lessens you. Greed makes us pitiable because it makes us settle for cheap, shabby imitations of the goodness we were made for. It makes us like heirs of a great inheritance who throw it all away for a bowl of stew. The question is what you set your heart on: money, sex, power, food — if you get your heart’s desire, will it ultimately leave you wanting more, and if it does, then it’s a pretty safe bet that it’s the result of some type of greed.

One of the things my heart desires, I must admit, is Stewart’s ginger beer. It is, hands down, the best ginger beer I have tasted, and I’ve tasted quite a lot of ginger beer. It’s always been hard to find for some reason, so by now I’m sure Pastor Carey is tired of taking me to the grocery store and losing track of me because sometimes I head off into the soft drink aisle to see if they have Stewart’s ginger beer, and if they do, I buy a lot of it. The terrible thing is that I recently discovered that Stewart’s has stopped making it, so I may have some of the last few bottles in existence. It’s one of those things that I really enjoy, sitting down with a big frosty mug of Stewart’s ginger beer, and any time I’m in a grocery, I keep half an eye open for it.

Now there’s nothing wrong with enjoying things like Stewart’s ginger beer. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying food or sex or the nice expensive things in life that you make priorities of. Enjoying something does not necessarily count as greed. Having wealth does not necessarily make you a greedy miser, and God does not expect you to live your entire life denying every desire you

have. God made this world and the things in it, and He made it to be very good, and He always intended for us to enjoy it and take care of it and be blessed by it. There are many examples of times when God has blessed someone by giving them stuff. But the issue is what your heart's deep desire is. When enjoyment strays over into lust, when our desire is only to have, to control, and to have more, that is when we find ourselves in deep trouble.

But surely King Midas is a caricature, isn't he? Surely Ebenezer Scrooge, with his obsessive penny-pinching in spite of his vast wealth, surely he's a caricature? Everyone knows that greed like *that* is bad, but if we don't go to that extreme, is greed really worth getting all that worked up about? Let's face it, to a certain degree our entire economic system operates on greed, because if you don't want to make more money, you're probably not likely to be a very good businessperson. We're taking a few weeks to look at some really challenging topics in our faith, and last week we talked about hell because it raises some really hard questions about our belief and our God. But is greed really in the same league as hell?

Let me direct your attention to our reading from Colossians for this morning, and specifically to verse 5: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry." Or we could look Romans 1, where Paul describes the state of people who are apart from God, and he lists greed along with just about every kind of evil you can imagine, including sexual immorality. Jesus did a very similar thing in Mark 7 when He points out the evils that come from within a person, including things like sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, and so on. Or Ephesians 5, where Paul says that "among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed," and he goes on to say that greedy people are idolaters who have no inheritance among the people of God. And again, in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, he lists the greedy among the sexually immoral and thieves.

What I want us to see is that the biblical authors took greed very, very seriously. It's especially interesting to me that many Christians and churches in America today focus very heavily on sexual sins. They make us squirm, and we don't like to think about them, and we treat them as though they are particularly bad sins. We have large segments of the church today that are arguing publicly that gay marriage, if the government allows it, will destroy America and possibly the whole of Western civilization. It is not my intent to argue the topic of biblical sexual ethics today; the Bible as a whole is quite clear on what it says on that matter. But the point is that we as Christians can, if we're not careful, select the sins we really don't like as being especially bad, while turning a blind eye to the sins that we don't think are as big a deal, maybe in some cases because they hit a little too close to home.

Many American churches spend a lot of energy arguing about sexual immorality, and they should, because sexual sins are incredibly destructive and dangerous. But it's fascinating to me how often the biblical authors list greed, and other sins, right up there alongside sexual immorality. I don't hear nearly as many Christians getting nearly as worked up over the greed and lust for power in our culture. Maybe we think sex is icky and kind of scary, so we'd rather preach against that, while greed, well, greed surely isn't *that* bad.

Oh, yes it is. First of all, it's just stupid. If we look through the Old Testament, we see several reactions to greed, and the first one is that greedy people are just fools, plain and simple. Proverbs 23:4 and 5 says, "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a

glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.” Or in Ecclesiastes 5:10, “whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless.” The biblical authors were wise enough to see that greed is never satisfied, and even if you have great wealth, you can’t count on it, so greed is pointless. The greedy are fools.

But more than that, greed motivates its victims to do terrible things to others. In Isaiah chapter 1, as the great prophet is beginning to make God’s case against His people, he says, “Your rulers are rebels, partners with thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them.” God says this is cause for venting His wrath, and at one point in Isaiah 57, God says He’s “enraged” by their greed. Again and again in the books of the prophets, we find out that the greed of the people has led them to pervert justice; they’ve accepted bribes from the rich people who can afford to pay off the judge, so the poor people who are being defrauded and mistreated cannot count on receiving justice. If your heart cares about money or power more than it cares about people, you’re willing to step on people to get more money or power. And in case it’s not clear from the writings of the prophets, that makes God incredibly angry. He doesn’t like it when rich and powerful people take advantage of the weak.

And we also see that not only does greed make you a fool and a bully who hurts people who can’t defend themselves, it also risks your relationship with God. We read part of the story of Hezekiah from the book of the Kings, and we need to realize that Hezekiah was one of the very few good kings of that time period; almost all of the rest of the kings over God’s people don’t get remembered well because they led their people away from God. Hezekiah, however, was actually responsible for a revival that turned people back to serving God. More than that, God came close to destroying the kingdom during that time, but because of Hezekiah’s piety, God relented. And then we get this strange episode in which Hezekiah lets pride get the better of him. It’s not exactly greed, but it comes from the same place, that lust for power and esteem in the eyes of other people. And so he boastfully displays his wealth to some foreign ambassadors who are in town, and the prophet Isaiah lets him know that his pride has damaged his relationship with God. That pride will have consequences down the road. Greed is not a small thing in God’s eyes. Setting your heart on things that are not worthy is a big deal. In Hezekiah’s case, it brought down a nation.

Greed is not necessarily the worst of all sins; the New Testament writers mention a whole host of other things along with greed. But we’re focusing on it today because it’s often an overlooked sin in our culture. It’s something that a lot of people don’t really think is a sin, and in fact our world often rewards greed. But God does not take it so lightly when the creatures He made to have their hearts set on Him insult Him by setting their hearts on things that are beneath them.

What do we do? We replace worthless things with things of true value. The antidote to greed is practicing love and generosity toward God and others. As Paul says in Colossians, “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in

your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”



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