

Singing the Lord's Song in a Capitalistic Society

Luke 12:13-21

Greed is good
Greed is right
Greed works
Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit
Greed in all its forms
Greed for life, for money, for love, for knowledge
Has marked the upward surge of all mankind

These words are part of a masterful argument presented to stockholders in the 1987 movie, *Wall Street*. Gordon Gekko was a financier who wanted to take over the company. I call his argument masterful because it was. He began by telling the stockholders that the bureaucrats currently in charge of the company were frivolously spending their profits on corporate jets, steak lunches and golden parachutes. Then he let them know that when 2.5 million stockholders had placed their fates in his hands in the past he had earned a pre-tax profit of \$12 billion dollars. He then topped off his argument with "greed is good." He knew his audience well. When he finished the speech the stockholders were on their feet, clapping and agreeing with Gekko that Greed is good.

Gekko's view of greed is a bit different than Jesus' view. Indeed Jesus seemed irritated about having his teaching interrupted to respond to a greedy question posed by a man in the crowd. In the previous verses we find Jesus teaching a crowd of thousands but directing his teaching to his disciples. He was preparing them to go into the world and preach the gospel. They would be persecuted. He was telling them not to worry about or fear what people would do to their bodies. Just like God took care of sparrows, God would take care of them. He was also telling them that when they were brought before synagogues to defend their faith, the Holy Spirit would teach them what to say.

Then from out of nowhere, a man asked Jesus "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." And Jesus responded as if to say "what?" But not being one to allow a teaching moment to pass him by, Jesus said, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. For one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." An in typical Jesus fashion, just to make sure that the man and the crowd understood his point; he told a parable to make his meaning clear.

Jesus told a story about a wealthy landowner whose crops provided him with abundant yield. So much so that he had to make a decision. Usually, he was able to store the crop yield in his existing barns. But because the yield was so abundant in this particular year, he would not have room to store all that he had. He had to decide what to do with the overflow. It is important that we make note of the man's decision process. The positive aspect of his decision process was that he asked the question, "What should I do?" We learn in seminary that questions provoke thought and sometimes allow us to encounter and to imagine new possibilities.

The flaw of the question was that he asked the question of himself. He did not ask any of the workers in the field what he should do with the overflow. They may have said give it to the poor, like us. He did not take a walk into the local village or villages in his surrounding area to

see it there were people who were in need of food. He certainly did not pray and ask God what he should do. The only one he consulting about his decision was himself. So of course the resulting decision was one that he thought, in his limited knowledge, was best for him. He would tear down the existing barns and build new ones. Then he did the unthinkable. He congratulated himself for making such an astute decision. He spoke to his soul. He said "soul you have food for many years so eat, drink and be merry."

I was on Oprah Winfrey's website the other day and read a story about a couple in North Carolina named Lisa and Steve Bradley. The Bradleys have two adorable children named Madison and Michael. Lisa and Steven both have good jobs and earn good income. They have a nice home. Two brand new cars and are very well groomed. From the outside it appears that they are living the American Dream. If you look at them in public you would think they were one ongoing Kodak moment. However, when one looks a little bit closer something is amiss. Michael and Madison don't always like being home with their parents late at night. Nighttime is when their parents argue about money. The monthly mortgage is actually more than they can afford. Two new cars add to their financial burden. They came into their marriage with almost \$80,000 in student loan debt. Since their parents fight constantly about money Madison and Michael are afraid their parents may break up. But - the Bradleys, look good in their nice house, driving their new cars, wearing their very nice clothes. They look like a Kodak moment.

When we shop for clothes in Louisville we go to malls in suburban areas with wide open, expansive spaces. In cities like San Francisco, you can find urban malls in the heart of downtown. If you were to go shopping in San Francisco, you could visit the San Francisco Shopping Center at Union Square. Shopping there is truly an experience. Beginning the moment you walk in the door you are entering a shopper's paradise--your feet glide on white marble floors. You are soothed by music throughout the space. In the center of the center is a series of breathtaking spiral escalators that ascend through a total of nine floors of upscale shops -- all the way up to and through the land of Nordstrom. In the newest section completed in 2006 for \$460 million, you can find the nation's second largest Bloomingdales nestled in a sea of glass and marble elegance. With over one million square feet of retail space, you can shop until you drop. When you feel you can't go on --you can refresh yourself in one of many restaurants, grills, bistros, and cafes are conveniently located on the ground floor. When you prepare to leave this ethereal space, be careful. You may literally stumble into or over a homeless person on the other side of the door. They will ask you for money. Some of the response I have observed from many people vary from ignoring them, to giving them a few dollars or cents, to telling the homeless to get a job.

In the movie, Gordon Gekko ends up not only buying the company for which he did the speech but another. He told the union representatives of the company that his intent was to take over the company and make it profitable. But just before he gained control of the company the representatives found out that Gekko intended to break the company into pieces, sell those pieces to the highest bidders, and make a handsome profit. In addition Gekko also intended to raid the pension so that workers who lost their jobs would also be robbed of their retirement funds.

Gekko did not care what happened to the employees. He never gave them a thought. He did not care if they were suddenly tossed into homelessness because of his lust for money. He did not care if the children of the employees could not eat or go to college. He did not care if relationships were broken as a result of their sudden poverty. He did not care if whole communities disintegrated and disappeared as a result his deal making. He only cared about the deal. He lived for the kill. He lived to win. He would win at any cost. His identity was derived

from his power, his material accumulations, from his influence. He was his job. He was his power. He was his wealth. At the end of the movie he was on his way to jail.

Jesus called the man who stored up treasures for himself rather than seeking to be rich towards God a fool. Jesus does not spell out exactly what he means when he says we should be rich towards God. But if we are to use Jesus' life as an example we may be in the ballpark by believing it has something to do with loving God and loving our neighbors.

So, do we agree with Gordon Gekko?

Is greed good?

Is greed right?

Does greed work?

Does greed clarify, cut through and capture the essence of the evolutionary spirit

Has greed in all its forms --

Greed for life, for money, for love, for knowledge

Marked the upward surge of all mankind?

Jesus said:

Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.

For one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Amen