

Greed

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] So, in our study in Proverbs, we're looking today at the theme of greed. We read a couple of verses from Proverbs that speak of that. We know Proverbs is a book that is full of themes.

You don't necessarily read it chapter by chapter to get the themes. They appear in different places throughout Proverbs. And it's a book that was given probably originally to a young prince, to a young person from the King.

And of course, under God, it becomes God's book of common sense in many ways for us as Christians seek to find the practical realities of trusting Jesus and what that means for our day-to-day living.

And so, it's quite a challenging theme. It's one that we maybe don't often think about, but I hope you'll find it both challenging and encouraging at the same time.

That certainly will be my intention. No one really likes... I think it would be fair to say that no one really likes greed or greedy people as we would define them.

[1 : 0 8] Greed or avarice, the word themselves are kind of ugly words and we associate them with not with ourselves. Maybe put it that way.

No one really likes these words very much, maybe except those who benefit from them. But when we think of greed or avarice or it's cousin or brother or sister, covetousness, which we read about also in Luke's Gospel, then we tend...

Maybe I'm wrong, but I suspect we tend to think of these characteristics as belonging to other people. It's not something we would recognize in ourselves very much, maybe a little bit, but not very much.

We tend to think of maybe corporate greed, greed that we see in business or the excess of the billionaires that we hear about on the news, or indeed the wealth inequality in society and injustice and the greed that causes poverty for so many people.

Or we read with shock about the Euro million lottery and its highest payout of 185 million pounds to one person, or the American version of that Powerball lotto where 1.5 billion is the highest payout to three particular individuals.

[2 : 3 3] And we sense the unfairness and the kind of ugliness of that, maybe sometimes we're a bit envious or jealous of that, I would hope not.

But it's good and it's right, isn't it? That inequality and that greed that sometimes we see in society and outside of ourselves, and maybe we see sometimes in our relationships and in our neighborhoods, that we sense that injustice of it.

And that's a good thing and a right thing and an important thing. But what I want to do this morning for a few short minutes is move beyond what we see outside and what we see in the world around us and what might be the case of social injustice, which is a real and important thing.

And look at the deeper motivation that's in our own hearts, the spiritual genesis and the crisis that lies within each of our hearts that may cause us also to no grief in our lives.

But we're moving into difficult economic days personally in our lives and maybe there will be a greater temptation to accumulate or to become embittered at the poverty that we're facing or the bills that we have to pay or the bills we can't pay.

[3 : 53] And maybe it will evoke within us some feelings that are new to us and difficult for us. But it is interesting that in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, where Jesus or the apostles make lists of different sins that we are to deal with in our lives and to resist and to overcome and to repent from, that greed is always there.

It always is part of these lists. There's six or seven different lists in the New Testament that list different practical, real sins and challenges that we face in our lives to deal with as new people, as Christians, whose hearts and lives crisis transforming.

And greed is always among them. And so as Christians today, I want us to consider that. Jesus found it important enough to mention in the apostles of the New Testament, mentioned greed.

And so it's obviously something that if we're honest with ourselves, maybe something we struggle with at one level or another. And if you're not a Christian today, if you're just visiting, if this first time you're in church or you're maybe just looking at, thinking about the gospel and the truth of Christianity, then I encourage you just to hear God from His Word and look into your own heart and see what might be there because these are massive issues and they are significant and important for us.

So by way of introduction, I think if we look at a broader kind of perspective of Scripture, I think it would be fair to say that greed really translates or greed relates to glory.

[5 : 41] Greed is about glory in many ways. And glory in the Bible is about to whom we attribute worship, who comes first in our lives or what comes first in our lives.

So there's a link between greed, I think, and between glory. Greed is about wanting more. It's about biblical, it's about wanting what belongs to others.

It's about being envious of what others have and grasping of what we can get and when we can get it, even if, especially if or because it will damage us.

It will damage our relationship with God and with other people. At a foundational level, it resonates with the deepest need that we are all challenged with, we all face, which is that we are image bearers of God, but we are not God.

That's the biggest challenge we face, that as image bearers of God we are, but we are not God ourselves. Now you look around the world and you look into your own life and you look around as when you see incredible ability, incredible beauty, creativity, intelligence, desire, way beyond anything else in the creation around us.

[6 : 56] We see that in humanity and we see in ourselves, but we hate the fact that there is someone greater than even humanity than ourselves.

We struggle that the foundational reality of sin in our lives is we struggle with being image bearers of God, giving glory to God rather than seeking glory for ourselves, so that greed becomes the outworking of our fallen human nature, the human condition of every single heart, which is by nature that we are rebels against God's glory.

We greedily seek that glory for ourselves. We want that independence and we want to live without Him. In our lives without Christ we deny the glory that God alone is due.

We want it for ourselves. And we see that. We see that being at work both in the paradox I was praying about, about beauty, but about brokenness in the world in which we live.

Every loveless act and every grumble of our hearts and every irrational prickliness that you sense in a conversation when God's name is brought up, it's that deep-seated rebellion against His Lordship and His glory, because our desires, we fight against our desires coming first, and it's the outworking of this disordered love where we start with ourselves and we are dissatisfied, always craving for more, which is really where greed comes into its own.

[8 : 43] So if I were to define greed with a biblical perspective, I would say that greed is looking for value and security and abundant life in the wrong ways and in the wrong places that don't face God.

So that greed is looking for value and security and abundant life in the wrong ways, in the wrong places that are not facing God.

And so we're going to look at that for a few minutes as we go through the Bible. So they're looking for these things in the wrong way.

Proverbs 28, 25 says, and it's one of these great opposites, you know, that we've spoken about that, that there are couplets, very often there's a negative and a positive right through the book of Proverbs, and Proverbs 28, 25 is one of them.

The greedy stirs up conflict, but those who trust in the Lord will prosper. And so we find that greed, the core of greed is that thing, it's not trust, initially it's not trusting in the Lord.

[9 : 57] It's ignoring God and not trusting in Him and His will and in His provision for your life. It's looking for that satisfaction, meaning, worth, through wealth, through accumulation, through luxury, through having power over others in a kind of self-centered way that may provoke itself in being unjust.

And it inevitably leads to conflict. The greedy stirs up conflict, but those who trust in the Lord will prosper. So there's the great tension James 4 in the, almost in the New Testament version of Proverbs, James that very practical, shorter book in the New Testament, says, what causes fights and quarrels among you?

Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but you do not have. So you kill, you covet, but you cannot get what you want. So you quarrel and fight.

You do not have because you do not ask God. And when you do not receive because you ask for the wrong motives that you may spend it or what you get on your pleasure. So there's that great New Testament parallel of greed, of not trusting in God.

The actual word in the Hebrew is interesting. It kind of, it means to cut off or to break or to grab by violence, this kind of underlying image that we get from the word.

[11 : 21] It's grasping what's not meant for you, cutting it off from someone else and taking it for yourself unjustly without consideration of the pain that might cause other people.

And interestingly, the root of that word that that verb is used in Job 27 of God says, Job 27 verse 8, for what hope have the Godless when they are cut off, when God takes away their life?

So there's that sense in which if we are grasping and taking without reference to God, we're actually not only separating ourselves from God, but we are not grasping onto the life that He is offering.

It's denying God His rightful place who offers us true life, which is only found when we face Him, which is only found in His company, which is only found in relationship to Him.

So the wrong way it's not taking, it's not trusting in the Lord. And it's also the wrong way because it takes, greed takes advantage of other people. We read that in the second proverb that we looked at, Proverbs 15, whoever is greedy for unjust gain brings ruin to their society, to the city, to the powers that be, to their boss.

[12 : 37] No, brings ruin to their household. Brings ruin to their household, but He, the one who hates bribes will live. Whoever is greedy for unjust gain brings ruin to their household, to those closest to them.

And so we recognize that seeking an abundant life and seeking wholeness in life, security and love, by grasping and being greedy without reference to God and taking advantage of others will be destructive because we will be in relationship with people, but seeking only our own good and our own self-interest.

Coveting hurts other people. Being greedy hurts other people. It's the bookend of the Ten Commandments. The first bookend talks about putting God first.

The last commandment talks about not coveting, not grasping after your neighbor's house, not coveting your neighbor's wife or his male or female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

So you've got this recognition that if you updated that command to whatever happens to be our neighbor's belongings and relationships, if we seek these things in a way that is greedy and selfish, there is great damage done, taking advantage of who they are at their expense.

[14 : 16] In many ways, you can broaden the whole concept of greed as the commandment does itself, to lust, to illicit love, to rape, to enslavement, to control.

You think of Nathan the prophet when he confronts David and he gives him that picture, that parable of the poor man who has one lamb and the rich man who has a whole flock of sheep and he goes to the poor man, takes his only lamb to sacrifice.

And it's just, it's accusing and mixing a practical picture and a picture of greed with a picture of lust and a picture of self-centeredness.

And it kind of all mixes in together, so it's kind of hard to separate out. But it's looking for abundant and full life the wrong way by leaving God out and by taking advantage of others.

So it's looking for value security and abundant life in the wrong way. But it's also looking for value security and abundant life in the wrong places.

[15 : 19] And I think we would recognize that one of the great ways that greed reveals itself is in a desire for being rich financially, financially wealthy.

James 5 in the next chapter, and I'm going to read this because it's fiery, it's beautifully fiery and powerful.

Come on, you rich weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.

But you have laid up treasure in these last days, behold the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud or crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You've fattened your hearts in the day of slaughter. You've condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

[16 : 19] Really strong words, not against wealth per se, but against that hoarding and that abusive wealth that has crushed other people, that has denied justice and has taken wealth as a right that their own goodness and grace has enabled them to have.

So looking for abundant life in the wrong places financially. So much of Proverbs speaks about bribery, even the passages we read speak about becoming rich through bribery and through oppression and Habakkuk, 2 verse 5, Lichens financial greed to death itself.

It's never satisfied. It's always looking for more. And so it's always linked to injustice and to foolishness. Jesus says, no servant can serve two masters for either he will hate one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other, you cannot serve God in money.

Or Mark 8, 36, 4, what does it profit a man? Very famous words to gain the whole world, 4 feet of soul, 1.5 billion on the lottery.

The whole world. What does it gain if he loses his soul? The reading in Luke, of course, exposes that, as I mentioned in a minute.

[17 : 41] But it's important to recognize, isn't it, that one day, maybe in this life, it may come before we die, or certainly the moment that you draw and I draw my last breath, no more financial withdrawals, no more financial deposits.

It all stays behind, every last penny. It bears no credit value, no currency, the moment we die.

And so to look for stability and meaning and value in life, in financial security, abundant life in financial security, is looking not only in the wrong way, but it's looking in the wrong place, financial security.

And connected, obviously, with that, parallel and alongside that, is the accumulation of material possessions, not just financial wealth in and of itself, but material possessions.

And Luke 12 speaks, the passage we read, where Jesus speaks about the rich, the rich businessman who is doing wealth, it's interesting, isn't it, that he says, oh, my fields have produced a great amount.

[19 : 04] You know, it's not even really his greatness, it's nature has produced this great gift of nature has produced tremendous harvest for him and his barns can't hold it.

So he says, I'm going to build bigger barns and I'm going to make a great investment and I'm going to sit back and I'm going to have a life of luxury. I'm going to eat, drink and be merry. And of course, Jesus says, well, you fool, or God says you fool.

Tonight, your soul will be demanded of you. You've not been rich towards God. And so there's this recognition and not only the wrong way by not trusting in God or taking advantage in others and not just the wrong place, financial wealth, but also material possessions, stuff, storing up luxuries, lots and lots of things, taking pride in them.

And making our status be reflective by what we own, by the car we drive, by the house we live in, by all of these material reflections of our character.

What we spend our money on and what we spend our time on will be reflective of where our heart lies, presuming, because there can be a great presumption in all of us that we presume that our health and our time, our gifts from God, or not gifts from God rather, are things that we can presume on.

[20 : 37] And none of us here can presume on these things, none of us. And so there's a great recognition of what greed is exposing in Proverbs and throughout the Bible is that we're looking for life and abundance and meaning and satisfaction in the wrong places and in the wrong way.

The antidote is the old message. It doesn't change. Any of you could get up here as Christians and preach the rest. You can probably preach the first bit as well. But the rest of it you could all preach, because it's the positive side of Proverbs chapter 28, verse 25, the greedy stir up conflict, but those who trust in the Lord will prosper.

The antidote is trusting in the Lord and all that that means biblically. And maybe, well, what does it mean to trust in the Lord? What are you asking when it says to trust in the Lord?

Is it just a cold command? God is there, trust in Him, and just get on with it. No, it's about giving our whole heart and our whole soul to God as our Savior and as our Lord, because of His great character and His great love.

Who is God? Because we're called to give Him glory in and of Himself, just for who He is. We speak and we've spoken of when we preach to you about the glory of God that He is rich in every way you can use that word.

[22 : 12] He's rich in His perfect love and His completeness and the beauty of the inter-trinitarian relationships of love and service for one another and His infinite wealth of justice and being right and being good and being loving as the genesis and the source of every single atom and part of this world that we see is creative and His, just His character is so infinitely rich.

So He's worthy of being trusted in and of Himself. But of course, the greatest manifestation of His riches, of His everlasting and eternal riches is the overflowing and superabundant grace where He actively takes on the poverty of humanity.

So the words of 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9 are so important here for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor so that you through His poverty might become rich and that's the essence of the gospel and that speaks right into our greedy hearts and the temptation of our hearts to be greedy because of what He did in His glory.

He emptied Himself, made Himself nothing as a human being, uniquely poor, denying His rightful glory, emptying it, worse than that becoming spiritually bankrupt in our place and for us, taking our bankruptcy spiritually, our lostness, our poverty, we've been looking at poverty and the beatitudes and what it means spiritually, so that we might not remain separated from Him, that our sins might be dealt with that separate us from and that we might know real life and real abundance and real meaning and find what we have been created to live as worshipers, as image-bearers who are not greedy to become gods, who are not greedy to ignore God and keep Him out but who in humility accept all the riches of His grace and salvation and no true fulfillment and peace.

So it's recognizing that and then recognizing an understanding, His generosity to us as people, as individuals, as believers, both in the grace that allows us all to be here today, to breathe, to be healthy enough to be here, to go back to homes, to have all the common evidences of His love for us but also His saving grace for us in Jesus Christ, which is remarkable that all of us as believers today are transported back to Calvary 2,000 years ago where He died in our place and took our death so that we might deal with it, the greed and all the different battles that we face which deny Him His Lordship and His love.

[25 : 35] So it's important for us to test where our desires lie. It's important for us to test whether we're maybe trying to bribe God to accept us, I'll be really good this week Lord.

I'll go to church. I might even go to church twice. I'll read more than one verse of the Bible. I'll pray when I can, will you accept me? Bribe Him with what we try to do or will we simply accept His gift and know His overwhelming righteousness covering us and simply follow Him for that reason, trusting in the Lord and knowing a prospering in life as a result.

It's allowing Him to transform our hearts and our appetites, the wonderful power of His forgiveness that doesn't let us stay away from Him because we're doing and failing and struggling and tripping up and falling, but going back to Him because He loves us and because He forgives us and just knowing the true riches of His company.

You know, in some ways it's all about obedience and in other ways it's got nothing to do with obedience if I can say that because it's all about His company.

And when we're in His company and when we know Him as He is known, His provisions, His care, His justice, His purposes, when you recognize you're His child then obedience follows.

[27 : 16] It's recognizing these things and therefore as we finish becoming rich towards God. Jesus says that it doesn't need to be the rich man. He says that that's the problem.

It wasn't that you weren't... The accumulation of these things doesn't seem to be what He exposes, what Jesus exposes is that in His heart He wasn't rich towards God.

It's a problem with every wrong motivation in our lives. It's not being rich towards God and we're called as Christians and you and I are called today to be rich towards God.

That is to give Him preeminence in our lives. First place, first place in our lives when we get up in the morning to thank Him that our last breath hasn't been drawn, that His mercies are new every morning, coming to Him because we have great needs and because He's our Father and He provides for us and dealing with the selfishness that would keep us from Him.

Becoming rich towards God and then the parallel to that is always also being generous towards others.

[28 : 41] That's the polar opposite of greed, isn't it? It's interesting that the passage we read in Corinthians about Jesus being rich and becoming poor so that through His poverty we might become rich, it's in the context of asking the Corinthian church to be generous practically with helping the poor in Macedonia, the Macedonian church.

So it's recognizing the spiritual value of what we've received and letting it transform how we think of others in generosity, yes, and financial, but just generally being generous in the way we think of others, helping those in their need, whether it's practical, financial or spiritual, the grace of giving is the opposite of generosity.

Generally generous, putting the needs and the luxury of others before our own so that greed is really the opposite of love.

And it's about being thankful for other people and for what they have, even if we don't have it, and not demanding it or stealing it or grasping it for ourselves, whether it's their partner, whether it's their house, whether it's their job, whether it's their gifts, whatever it is, it's having a magnanimity, a generosity towards others because of who they are, a thankfulness for who God has made us and a contentment and a satisfaction that He will provide all that we need.

And if He has given us wealth and if He's given us many gifts and many blessings, we will bless others with them, we will share them out because of what Jesus has done for us and how He has shared for us.

[30 : 40] So we look for value and security and abundant life in the right way, in the right places that are facing God.

And we'll not go that far wrong when we do that. Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that You would help us to understand who You are, that You're an outward-facing, generous, abundant, patient, loving, but also just God.

And Your love and generosity is even overwhelmed or subsumed Your justice on the cross, and both are satisfied there.

And may we find our trust in the Christ who died for us, for our sin and our separation and our greed that separates us from You and makes us not image bearers in the right sense, but envious of what God has and wanting that independence and that isolation from Him.

So draw us to Your love and draw us to Your grace and help us to live today and tomorrow in the light of Your generosity, and may we fight against the temptation to be greedy either financially or relationally or spiritually in our lives.

[32 : 12] We ask it in Jesus' precious name. Amen.