

## The Great Treasure Hunt

Scripture: Relating to vice (greed): Luke 12:13-21; 1 Kings 21:1-37  
Relating to virtue (generosity): 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Matthew 6:19-34

One of my favorite people in my childhood church was a man named Sam. Sam and his wife, Thelma, sat in the second pew from the back on the south side of the church, next to the thermostat. From that location, Thelma took attendance while Sam regulated the temperature in the sanctuary. My brothers and their friends sat in the row behind them. Girls weren't welcome there, so I sat on the opposite side of the aisle. I found out later that Sam always had jelly beans in his pocket to share with the boys in the back row. Maybe I was aware of that practice but forgot about it because the boys ended up with a lot more jelly beans than I did. In any case, what I do remember is something Sam often said. "I'm going to tear down my barn, build a bigger barn, and fill it with jellybeans!" And then someone would pipe up with, "And God said, 'You fool, for tonight you will die.'" Somehow this whole interchange would send us into peals of laughter.

I don't know when it was that I realized Sam's words came from a biblical parable – not about jellybeans, of course, but about a huge harvest. The parable is recorded in Luke 12. This is how the biblical version goes.<sup>1</sup>

*A person in the crowd got Jesus' attention. "Teacher, intervene and tell my brother to share the family inheritance with me."*

*Jesus replied, "Since when am I your judge or arbitrator?" Then He used that opportunity to speak to the crowd. "You'd better be on your guard against any type of greed, for a person's life is not about having a lot of possessions." And Jesus began another parable.*

*A wealthy man owned some land that produced a huge harvest. He often thought to himself, "I have a problem here. I don't have anywhere to store all my crops. What should I do? I know! I'll tear down my small barns and build even bigger ones, and then I'll have plenty of storage space for my grain and all my other goods. Then I'll be able to say to myself, 'I have it made! I can relax and take it easy for years! So I'll just sit back, eat, drink, and have a good time!'"*

*Then God interrupted the man's conversation with himself. "Excuse Me, Mr. Brilliant, but your time has come. Tonight you will die. Now who will enjoy everything you've earned and saved?"*

*This is how it will be for people who accumulate huge assets for themselves but have no assets in relation to God.*

In many translations, the last verse reads something like: *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*<sup>2</sup> Somehow, the way it reads in *The Voice* makes it much more relevant to me. *This is how it will be for people who accumulate huge assets for themselves but have no assets in relation to God.* I assume we all want to have assets in relation to God. I know I do.

In our series on vices and virtues we've considered envy or contentment and pride or humility.<sup>3</sup> Today we focus on greed or generosity. In the first sermon of the series, I suggested that a bit of envy might be an asset if it motivates a person to set worthy goals and actively work to achieve them. But envy often leads to bitterness, stripping an individual of joy and ruining relationships with other people.

In her sermon two weeks ago, June Thomsen demonstrated how pride gives rise to other sins and prevents a right relationship with God while humility puts us in the right position with the right perspective on

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:13-21, *The Voice*

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:21, New Revised Standard Version

<sup>3</sup> Snakes and Ladders: A Worshipful Study of the "Seven Deadly Sins" and "Seven Holy Virtues," *Leader, Summer 2019*, Vol. 16, No. 4, ©2019 MennoMedia, pp. 37-48.

the right path as followers of Jesus. This is true. However, I suggest that humility taken too far robs a person of the self-esteem needed to live the joyful, abundant life God intends. So a bit of pride is an asset too, if helps a person acknowledge their self-worth.

When it comes to greed, though, it's difficult for me to say that a bit of greed can be good. Greed isn't just a matter of desire, but also a matter of idolatry.<sup>4</sup> Greed is a worship of money and wealth for its own sake. In greed, our desires get the better of us, bringing out the worst in us. The disastrous effects of greed are illustrated in the story of King Ahab, Naboth, and a vineyard told in 1 Kings 21.<sup>5</sup> As the story begins, Ahab had just returned home from war, frustrated and bad-tempered. And then, to top it off, came this.

*Naboth the Jezreelite owned a vineyard that bordered the palace of King Ahab. One day Ahab made a request to Naboth. "Your vineyard is near my house. Why don't you hand it over to me so I can make a vegetable garden out of it? I'll trade you a better vineyard for it, or I can pay you, if you prefer."*

*But Naboth refused, "I'm sorry, God forbids me to give away any of my family land, even to you. Ahab went home in a bad mood, sulking over Naboth's response. He went to bed and refused to eat. Jezebel, his wife, noticed this and asked, "What's wrong with you? Why aren't you eating anything? This isn't like you."*

*He told her, "Because I spoke to Naboth asking for his vineyard, offering to pay him for it or giving him an even better vineyard in return. But he said he would never give me his vineyard because the Lord forbids it."*

*Jezebel chided him, "Is this any way for a king of Israel to act? Aren't you the boss? On your feet! Eat! Cheer up! I'll take care of this; I'll get the vineyard for you."*

*She wrote official letters in Ahab's name and sent them to the civic leaders. "Call for a fast day," she wrote, "and put Naboth at the head table. Then seat a couple of scoundrels across from him who, in front of everybody will say he blasphemed God and the king. Then they'll throw him out and stone him to death."*

*The leaders of the city did just as Jezebel instructed them to do. Naboth was executed.*

*When Jezebel got word that Naboth had been stoned to death, she told Ahab, "Go for it, Ahab—take Naboth's vineyard for your own, the one he refused to sell you. It's now yours for the taking, for Naboth is dead."*

*The minute Ahab heard that Naboth was no longer alive, he got up, went to the vineyard, and claimed it for his own. Success!*

*Then God stepped in and spoke to Elijah the prophet, "On your feet; go down and confront Ahab, king of Israel. You'll find him in the vineyard of Naboth. Say to him: 'This is a message from God. Are you a murderer and a thief?' Then tell him, 'This is God's verdict: The very spot where the dogs lapped up Naboth's blood, they'll lap up your blood.'"*

*Elijah did what God told him to do, calling Ahab a murderer and a thief.*

*Ahab answered Elijah, "Have you discovered what I have done, my enemy?"*

*"Yes, I've found you out," said Elijah. "And because you've bought into the business of evil, defying God, God says, 'I will most certainly bring doom upon you, make mincemeat of your descendants, kill off every sorry male wretch who's even remotely connected with the name Ahab.'"*

*Elijah also had a word from God about Jezebel, "Dogs will fight over the flesh of Jezebel. Anyone tainted by Ahab who dies in the city will be eaten by stray dogs; corpses in the country will be eaten by ravenous birds."*

*Ahab, pushed by his wife Jezebel and in open defiance of GOD, set an all-time record in making big business of evil. He indulged in outrageous obscenities in the world of idols, copying the Amorites whom God had earlier kicked out of Israelite territory.*

*When Ahab heard all of this, he ripped off his clothing, dressed himself in sackcloth, and entered into a time of fasting. He rested in depression.*

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<sup>4</sup> Commentary on greed and generosity draws from *Leader, Summer 2019*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from 1 Kings 21:1-29, *The Voice* and *The Message*

*Then God spoke to Elijah. “Have you witnessed Ahab’s repentance? He has shed his pride and wickedness and humbled his heart before Me. Therefore I will not send evil against his house while he is still alive; instead I will send it during the lifetime of his son.”*

As with other biblical stories, especially some in the Old Testament, we might have some questions about the way God works. Where’s the fairness in forgiving Ahab, but punishing his son instead? But the source of Ahab’s trouble is clear. It’s greed.

Ahab had more than he needed – more wealth, more power, more land – but it wasn’t enough. When Naboth refused to give him what he wanted, he sulked and then allowed other people to perform evil acts on his behalf. Naboth was greedy.

Greed is about obtaining and grasping. It’s about accumulating wealth, possessions, and power without any limits. The need to acquire more and more consumes our mind and controls every decision and action.

Generosity can be considered the opposite of greed. In releasing that which could control us, we return our trust to God. In addition, as we generously share that which we have – what we have earned and what has been gifted us, we become a blessing to other people.

The apostle Paul encourages generosity in one of his letters to the Christians in Corinth. <sup>6</sup> *Now, brothers and sisters, let me tell you about the amazing gift of God’s grace that’s happening throughout the churches in Macedonia. Even in the face of severe anguish and hard times, their elation and poverty have overflowed into a wealth of generosity. I watched as they willingly gave what they could afford and then went beyond to give even more. They came to us on their own, begging to take part in this work of grace to support the poor saints in Judea. We were so overwhelmed—none of us expected their reaction—that they truly turned their lives over to the Lord and then gave themselves to support us in our work as we answer the call of God. That’s why we asked Titus to finish what he started among you regarding this gracious work of charity. Just as you are rich in everything—in faith and speech, in knowledge and all sincerity, and in the love we have shown among you—now I ask you to invest richly in this gracious work too. I am not going to command you, but I am going to offer you the chance to prove your love genuine in the same way others have done. You know the grace that has come to us through our Lord Jesus [Christ]. He set aside His infinite riches and was born into the lowest circumstance so that you may gain great riches through His humble poverty. Listen, it’s been a year since we called your attention to this opportunity to demonstrate God’s grace, so here’s my advice: pull together your resources and finish what you started.*

*Remember how excited you were at first; it’s time to complete this task in the same spirit. Now if there is a willingness to help, give within your means. That’s perfectly acceptable. No one expects you to go without or borrow to give. The objective is not to go under so others will have some relief; the objective is to use this opportunity today to supply their needs out of your abundance. One day it may be the other way around, and they will need to supply your needs from what they have. That’s equality. As it is written, “The one who gathered plenty didn’t have more than he needed; the one who gathered little didn’t have less.”*

This is a fund-raising letter.<sup>7</sup> Paul wants the Corinthians to complete the collection of money they had begun the year before. He insists that the gift must spring from their own voluntary generosity. He appeals first to the grace of God, then to the example of the Macedonians, who gave joyfully even though they were poor. Next, he appeals to the example of Jesus, who divested himself to enrich the Corinthians. Paul ends with the story of the Israelites collecting manna in the wilderness, ensuring a fair balance among the people of God. Paul wants the Christians in Corinth to serve God by giving generously to equalize and unify the church.

I cringe a bit when Paul talks about the Macedonians who, though they were poor, gave what they could afford and then went beyond that to give even more. It reminds me of infomercials guaranteeing tremendous returns on small investments. Or, even worse, of preachers guaranteeing God’s blessing of health and wealth on those who donate more than they have to their ministry. It’s easy to misuse Paul’s words to feed the greed of an individual or an organization.

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, *The Voice*

<sup>7</sup> Commentary on 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 draws from V. George Shillington, *2 Corinthians: Believer’s Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 1998, pp. 170-171, 185-189.

But Paul's letter includes principles grounded in a theology of grace. The gift is to be voluntary, proportional to what one has, and equitable between groups.

**Voluntary.** Paul did his best to persuade his readers to complete their collection. At the same time, he tried to maintain the principle of voluntary giving of one's resources. Otherwise the gift wouldn't spring from grace but from necessity or coercion. When someone isn't willing to give, it may be because of greed and not wanting to share. It may also be because something isn't quite right about the cause to which a person is considering giving. Examining one's own motives and the motives of the one asking for help are necessary.

**Proportional.** Paul tells the Corinthians to give according to their means. A member should give relative what one has, not according to what one doesn't have. Those who have more, give more. Those who have less, give less. For example, a tithe is defined as 10% of what one has. Sometimes a person can give only 1% while someone else can give 20%. Both can be faithful, generous gifts.

**Equitable.** Paul uses the principle of equity in his appeal for a larger gift. The objective isn't to give away everything you have so others will have some relief. As we go through life, we have times of scarcity and times of abundance. The objective is to give out of your current abundance to meet the needs of someone else. One day it may be the other way around. They will be able to supply your needs from what they have.

In God's economy, everyone has enough of what they need. Today we're thinking primarily about material possessions – the basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter, education, and medical care along with money and wealth. But the ideas of greed and generosity also pertain to less tangible things such as power, privilege, access, acceptance, time, and talent.

God's economy doesn't mean everyone has exactly the same amount of everything. But those who have more are expected to share out of their abundance. Greed grasps tightly onto what one has and grabs for more. Generosity opens hearts and hands. It makes room for other people. It makes room for God.

Jesus talked about this in the sermon on the mount. Concerning treasure he said: *"Some people store up treasures in their homes here on earth. This is a shortsighted practice—don't undertake it. Moths and rust will eat up any treasure you may store here. Thieves may break into your homes and steal your precious trinkets. Instead, put up your treasures in heaven where moths do not attack, where rust does not corrode, and where thieves are barred at the door. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*<sup>8</sup>

Jesus also said, *"No one can serve two masters. If you try, you will wind up loving the first master and hating the second, or vice versa. People try to serve both God and money—but you can't. You must choose one or the other."*<sup>9</sup>

The treasure we stockpile by accumulating more and more and holding onto it tightly doesn't satisfy and doesn't last. The treasure we acquire honestly and justly, attend to with good stewardship, and share willingly out of loving and generous spirits brings us joy as it strengthens our relationships with other people and with God. These acts of generosity and service are good spiritual practices. In releasing that which could control us, we return our trust to God and become a blessing to others. In the process we accumulate huge assets in relation to God; we build a wealth of generosity

And that is good news indeed. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 6:19-21, *The Voice*

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 6:24, *The Voice*