

THE PARABLE OF THE



RICH FOOL

Luke 12:13-21

The painting above is by Rembrandt painted in 1627.

This parable tells of a person who starts off being wealthy but worries about his ability to store all that he has. He seems desperate for his wealth to grow, but he had forgotten to factor in one key element - **wealth towards God**. What does '**being wealthy towards God**' entail? The answer appears to be relatively simple - love of God and love of neighbour, neither of which can be found in this man's life.

The film '**Wall Street**', produced in 1987, featured Michael Douglas who, played the character Gordon Gekko, a grasping, greedy Wall Street money-grabber. There is a moment in the film where Gekko gives a speech to a room full of stockbrokers. This is what he said to them:

"The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that 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 mankind."

Gordon Gekko is a fictional character, but there are many real life characters who also believe that greed is a good thing. For example:

Ivan Boesky, a former American stock trader who became infamous for his prominent role in an insider trading scandal that occurred in the United States during the mid-1980s. He was charged and pleaded guilty to insider trading, was fined a

record \$100 million, and served three years in prison. In an address to Berkeley Business School students, he said: "*Greed is all right, by the way. I want you to know that. I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself.*"

Ayn Rand was a Russian-born American writer and philosopher. She is known for her fiction and for developing a philosophical system she named 'Objectivism'. Rand belittled self sacrifice in favour of self interest. In 1964 she wrote a collection of essays calling them '*The Virtue of Selfishness.*' At her funeral in 1982 Ayn Rand had arranged for a six-foot high flower arrangement of a dollar sign to stand next to her coffin. In the United States a survey asked people to name the most influential book in their life. Rand's novel, "Atlas Shrugged" was second only to the Bible. Ayn Rand still has many followers and disciples around the world today.

"Watch out!" said Jesus. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." To punctuate his point, he told a parable of "the rich fool" who built bigger barns for his increasing wealth. His smugness has passed into our everyday language: "Eat, drink and be merry." But he died that very night, left his wealth to others and never learned to be "rich towards God."

Jesus invites his followers to renounce and oppose greed: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

There are no easy answers to the hard sayings of Jesus. The first Christians held everything in common, selling their possessions and goods and gave to anyone in need. They shared everything they had. As time went by, these early Christians had to be rescued by financial collections from other churches organised by Paul and Barnabas. And so, as time went by, grappling with greed became more modulated and refined through the everyday generosity of ordinary believers leading eventually to the clerical stewardship of the finances of the church, where the total renunciation of wealth was no longer prescribed and giving became a voluntary and personal choice for the individual. After all, many wealthy women supported Jesus, and many wealthy people supported the early monasteries. Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy individual, who buried Jesus. It was realized you could not promote a single rule for everyone as different personal circumstances such as age, stage of life, health, family life etc all matter.

Greed is also psychologically complex. It has been observed how monks ,who had renounced great wealth, got angry over a small sum or a lost book. What matters most in the renunciation of greed in our disposition, desires or attitude. The

renunciation of money is an outward sign of the more important inward struggle. Battling greed is no easier for a monk or more difficult for a banker.

Take opportunities to be generous. Practising generosity creates space between us and greed. Every time we choose to be generous - with our time, our money, our talent - we are choosing not to let money be our master.

Be the individual God has called you to be. Everyone is trying to sell us something, but the reality is, we are not in a constant state of need. Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. There is not enough money in the world to gratify a soul separated from Jesus.

Jesus's call to renounce greed is for all Christians, not just a spiritual elite. How we all do that is a personal and complex spiritual discipline based on God's unique call on all our lives.

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