Focus

The greed of 19th-century Russia prompted novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky to write The Idiot, a story portraying a Christ-figure misunderstood by a materialistic culture. Without pride, greed, envy, or self-consumption, the main character Prince Myshkin stands in total contrast to the rest of society. Although they trust him because of his innocence and kindness, they cannot understand his naive goodness, and they decide that he is simply an idiot. After all, anyone who fails to seek material gain and accumulate wealth must be mentally incompetent, right?

When we realize how similar today's culture is to the culture of 19th-century Russia, we must sadly admit that maybe society hasn't advanced. Isn't it still true today? The world doesn't understand the altered values of society's "abnormals," like Mother Teresa who sacrificed all personal conveniences to minister to the poor. What our world understands best are terms like "net worth," "mortgage," "financial portfolio," and "buy-outs and takeovers."

How caught up in the mania of money are we Christians? Today's lesson helps us examine the gluttony of greed, its dangers to us individually and as a society, and scriptural alternatives to a greedy lifestyle.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS


COMMENTARY

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.

The Role of Money

Considering all of the factors that we may or may not share as Christians, one factor is clearly common to all of us—the role of money in our lives. Our society is largely based on and even consumed with the exchange, the production, and the accumulation of wealth. Regardless at what end of the spectrum we find ourselves—from barely getting by in balancing a budget to enjoying the profits of an upwardly mobile society—we are constantly affected by money.

This is no new idea. Money was a consuming issue in the day of Jesus and really, in some form or another, all of history. In fact, with the exception of the kingdom of God, money was the subject of Jesus' teaching more often than any other single topic. From the widow's mite to the rich young ruler's wealth, Jesus observed the emphasis people attached to money and its effect on their lives.

To compound the problem, today's young adults have never seen anything but a highly materialistic, profit-bound society. Most of them have never had to do without basic necessities and many of them have had nearly every desire for things fulfilled. This has left them with the constant nagging hunger for more, which is never satisfied.

Today's young adults live in a society of greed where "enough" always means "a little bit more."

A Little Bit More, Please

Sports—Professional athletes are commanding astronomical salaries, while the NCAA keeps a constant docket of investigations into college recruitment violations of offering prospective players cash, cars, and clothes.

Business—In a capitalistic society the bottom line is the bottom line. Corporations seek profit above all else, and often at the expense of their employees. Companies
export their factories to foreign countries where they can hire workers at very low prices, or they hire illegal immigrants at home as cheap replacements for legal workers. In other cases, the “dot com” flourish of the late 1990s saw many new start-up Internet companies. When the market turned slightly for the worse, many people lost their jobs. Secure jobs are too often a thing of the past these days.

 **Pop Appeal**—Television shows like *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood* run nightly forays into the extravagant lifestyles of Hollywood’s elite. And on special occasions, such as Oscars night or the Toronto Film Festival, much ado is made over the clothing and jewelry of the stars. Many people watching at home are captivated and desire such a lifestyle. How often have we seen a common person win the lottery only to blow it all on showy cars, houses, and clothing and wind up bankrupt? The image the media portrays is a powerful force encouraging human greed.

 **Environment**—Environmentalists and capitalists continue to war over the harvesting or destruction of resources, such as the rain forests and the wetlands, and suburban sprawl continues to consume habitat and strain natural resources, such as water, in people’s quest for newer and bigger homes. It could be argued on such examples that the lust for money and possessions supercedes good stewardship of the earth.

 **Books**—Tales of corporate greed, scandal, and “get rich” formulas often dominate best-seller lists.

 **International Scope**—We cannot escape the ever-present issue of money. In both China and Cuba, for example, in an effort to firmly entrench the principles of Communism, the government for a time suspended the use of money as a means of exchange and made it impossible to save money. But, in time, these tactics had to be abandoned. Money was reinstated both as a means of exchange and of savings. An incredible power, money seems destined to occupy a permanent place in society.

 **Generosity or Greed**

In truth we have only one choice when it comes to money—generosity or greed. It is time to take a hard look at the way we Christians view money and the significance we attach to it. Do we rule money or does money rule us?

 **Living Without Greed**

1. Living without greed means regaining our sense of eternal values.

How sad that in our society a person is often defined by the amount of his or her material value. We are guilty of asking, “How much is he or she worth?” as though a dollar sign places more value on one never-dying soul than another. We are carried along on the swift tide of secular materialism that lulls us into believing that “preparing for the future” means pensions, annuities, stock portfolios, and insurance.

What does the Scripture say? About the rich man who placed his confidence in his overflowing barns, Jesus said: “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God’ (Luke 12:20-21).

Greed makes us forget that we are citizens of another world (Hebrews 11:13-16), that this life at best is extremely short (Psalm 90:10), and that our ultimate treasures lie in eternity (Matthew 6:19-21). Living without greed means regaining our sense of eternal values.

2. Living without greed means regaining our sensitivity to others.

One of the first steps in coming into a proper relationship with money is to quit denying our wealth. For so long we have struggled to accumulate more, to pay off what we have bought on credit, and to save up to buy other things, that we have convinced ourselves that we are financially strapped. The more we have the more we want, and thus we are caught in a never-ending struggle.

We have fooled ourselves into believing that we are poor when actually we are the wealthy of the world. We must stop denying our wealth. We must face up to the tremendous hoard of resources that we have in North America. For example, the United States has only about two and one half percent of the world’s population, but it has a disproportionate amount of the wealth of the world. The very fact that North Americans live in a house, drive a car, and eat three meals a day (if we so choose), places us among the world’s wealthy. Even those who live on government assistance are, by the world’s standards, rich.

Reasons that we fail to admit our wealth is that we then become responsible for feelings of guilt about being greedy and spreading our resources around with those who are less fortunate.

What does the Scripture say?

“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (1 John 3:17).

Living without greed means admitting our wealth and thereby gaining a new sensitivity to the plight of those in need.

3. Living without greed means learning to live on less.

As difficult as it might sound, many of us could live on half of our current income without serious sacrifice. Yet we feel we are always just barely making ends meet. The paradox of this situation is that we continue to feel this way, even when our income increases. Whether we are earning $15,000, $50,000, or $150,000, we tend to live at the maximum limit of our income. And so the statement is proven true over and over: “Enough is just a little bit more.”

What does the Scripture say?

Jesus said, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance
of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). The T-shirt/bumper sticker philosophy of the world—“The one who dies with the most toys wins”—is wrong.

Greed is the source of conflicts, even wars, as people strive for things they don’t really need. “You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:2-3).

Henry David Thoreau, 19th-century author and social reformer, said: “Simplify, simplify, simplify. Our lives are frittered away by detail.” At the age of 28 he conducted an experiment to see how simply he could live by going to live alone more than two years at Walden Pond without any of the conveniences of city life.

“I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

It is not surprising that the first chapter of his book Walden is titled “Economy,” and in fact occupies more than a quarter of the entire book. Thoreau had learned the art of living with less.

The Christian response to greed lies in learning to live on less. Rather than spending to the edge of every paycheck, we can refuse to live on the maximum and learn the art of simplicity. When we discover the difference between luxuries and necessities, when we learn to live without every desire being fulfilled, when we avoid buying things that we will rarely use, then we will know the freedom of simplicity.

Simplicity not only frees us from greed and materialism; it also frees our resources to be used for what really matters. We must loosen our grip on material things for two reasons—to help the poor and to finance world evangelism. A simple lifestyle makes tithing God’s money easy and provides excess to share with the physically and spiritually needy.

As Christians we must determine to rule money rather than allow money to rule us. Only then will we regain our sense of eternal values, gain a new sensitivity to the poor, and learn to live on less.

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today’s subject.

1. You’re a Winner!
   Begin the class by announcing, “You’ve just won 50 million dollars. What are you going to do with the money?” Make a list of their answers on a chalkboard or flip chart. Now ask:
   • How much of this list is for self?
   • How much is for God?
   • How much is for others?
   • How much is for the poor?
   • Did you rule your money or did greed rule you?

2. A Piece of the Pie
   Draw a circle on a chalkboard or flip chart. Ask the class collectively to turn this into a pie chart, showing what percentage of their income goes for what purposes. Possible categories include housing, food, clothing, transportation, insurance, entertainment, savings, tithe, offerings, charities.
   Now ask the class if they are happy with their choices. Why, or why not? How long did it take for “tithe” and “offerings and charities” to be mentioned? Was it first on the list? Should it be?

You might choose to have paper and pens for each student to draw his or her own pie chart and then be prepared to discuss it with the class.

3. The World of Greed
   As an introduction to the topic of greed, use Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A, “The World of Greed.” Ask the class to brainstorm with you as you fill in examples of greed under each heading. Some of your class members will be able to provide up-to-the-minute examples, such as the names of the highest paid sports figures and what salaries they are commanding. They may want to add additional headings. Your lesson Commentary also provides information for each of these categories to supplement the class’s discussion.

4. A Fair Day’s Wages?
   A recent report noted that CEOs in the United States make approximately 457 times the amount of the average worker in their company. Does this strike you as fair? Why, or why not? In light of this, do you think it is wrong for a Christian to be the CEO of a large company? Can a person be wealthy and be a Christian at the same time?
Section 1: Living without greed means regaining our sense of eternal values.

- How would you describe your “net worth”?
- How would God describe your “net worth”?

Spring from this question into a discussion of net worth as defined by the world and net worth as defined by God. Then present the Commentary material in your own words.

Section 2: Living without greed means regaining our sensitivity to the poor.

- How wealthy do you consider yourself?
- Do you think you might be denying your real wealth? If so, why?

Spring from this question into a discussion of net worth as defined by the world and net worth as defined by God. Then present the Commentary material in your own words.

Section 3: Living without greed means learning to live on less.

- What do you own that you rarely or never use?
- What material items could you learn to do without? What would it take for you to actually do so?
- What is the difference between a luxury and a necessity?
- Who are some people who have chosen to live on less in significant ways?

Spring from this question into a discussion of net worth as defined by the world and net worth as defined by God. Then present the Commentary material in your own words.

3. How Do You Feel About Your Money?

Divide the class into three groups. Give each group one of the following scripture assignments to read together. Ask them to be prepared to discuss what effect these scriptures have on how they think about, feel about, or use their money. Have a spokesperson from each group give highlights to the rest of the class. Weave in the discussion material from the Commentary.

Group 1: Living without greed means regaining our sense of eternal values.

Psalm 90:10
Matthew 6:19-21
Luke 12:16-21
Hebrews 11:13-16

Group 2: Living without greed means regaining our sensitivity to the poor.

Psalm 41:1-2
Luke 4:18
Galatians 2:10
1 John 3:17

Group 3: Living without greed means learning to live on less.

Luke 6:20
Luke 12:15

Summary Options

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. Less Is Best

Repeat the story from the Commentary of Thoreau’s experiment with a simple lifestyle. Stress that simplicity is valuable in itself, but it also opens up ways for us to share more of our time and money in spreading the gospel and in helping the needy.

Now pass out paper and pens. Ask your students to make two columns on the page, labeled: CLUTTER I’D LIKE TO GET RID OF; and MORE FOR GOD AND OTHERS. For the first column, they should brainstorm ways their lives could become more simple by the process of elimination. Across from each item, whether it be tied to time or money, they should write how this would free them up to give more to God and others.

2. We Can Make It Happen

Determine to put what you have learned into action. Have the class decide on a group project to benefit the poor. You will want to scout out possibilities ahead of time for them. Possible choices include serving in a community soup kitchen, volunteering at a community children’s program, collecting clothing for a community clothes closet, or adopting a needy family.
3. Generosity over Greed

Two of the reasons we need to learn to live on less are so that we will be able to give more to the poor and more to advance God’s kingdom through evangelism. Discuss what avenues are available for giving to the poor and to the ministry of evangelism (tithing, special offerings, giving to missions, feeding programs, and child adoption, etc.).

Spend some time discussing the importance of tithing and sacrificial giving. Challenge every student to begin sacrificially giving in their own lives—whether that means they begin to tithe or they start to give above and beyond the tithe they already give.

To drive this point home, distribute one tithing envelope to each student with one of today’s significant scripture references written on it in large letters, symbolizing a commitment to generosity rather than greed.

To make this commitment time even more graphic, you might want to pass an offering plate around at this time, asking them to put the envelope back in if they are ready to make a real commitment toward generosity. Let them know that if they keep the envelope, no one will condemn them, and that the envelope can serve as a reminder of God’s call to be generous givers.

Use INTERSECT: College Chat Discussion Starters to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today’s lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

Notes

2. Ibid.

Selected Bibliography


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