

## Overcoming Greed

### Various texts

What we've just seen on the screens is a modern-day reenactment of a very famous psychological experiment first conducted in the 1960s. When Walter Mischel first placed a single marshmallow in front of a series of kindergarten students, promising another marshmallow if they were able to wait until his return, what he was investigating was the idea of delayed gratification. The experiment involved following up these kids later on in life and what Walter Mischel found was that those kids who were able to delay their gratification—those kids who were able to put off eating the marshmallow—went on to do better in school and to also earn higher wages as adults.

It's a really interesting experiment, and I find it illustrates all sorts of different things about spiritual life. It teaches us about temptation and what works and doesn't work as we try to resist it. You saw the young boy try not to look at the marshmallow, trying not to expose his senses to the very thing he wants to resist.

I also think it illustrates something about why it's hard to be generous. I'll explain why in a second, but first of all let me remind you about what we've been thinking about here in church over the last month. This is the fourth and final week in our series titled *The Generous Christian*. We've asked why we should be generous and the big answer to that is: we're imitating the generosity of God towards us in the Lord Jesus Christ. We've spoken practically about what generosity look like in real life, and we've also spoken about the obstacles that get in the way of generosity; indiscipline being one of them. And today were speaking about another obstacle to generosity: we're speaking about greed.

Now, if I were to ask you to define greed you might say "Well, being greedy is when you take more than what you need". And that probably fits if we were after a general everyday definition. But when the Bible talks about greed it's speaking about something a little more complex. The Bible's understanding of greed includes the idea of looking to be satisfied with the things around us rather than trusting and waiting for the future promises of God. Just as the kids in that experiment had to weigh up whether to reach out and grab what was easily in reach or to wait for what was promised later on, so too we Christians need to make a decision: do we reach out and hold onto what's available to us now or do we trust and wait for what God has promised us? If we were to give in to what we see around us, if we were to live a life marked by reaching out for everything we see and hoarding it for ourselves, then that's going to make it really hard to be generous with what we have, and the Bible even identifies such a life as a form of greed.

I appreciate that speaking about greed in this way is a little complex, so I'd like to spend a bit of time exploring the Bible's understanding of greed before thinking about what it might take to overcome it.

The idea of greed being defined by refusing to wait and grabbing hold of what's in front of us really starts with two NT texts from the apostle Paul. Colossians 3:5 is the first, where he says Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. The second is like it, Ephesians 5:5 where Paul again defines greed as a form of idolatry: For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

What does Paul mean when he says that greed is a form of idolatry? Well, idolatry is simply the worship of a false God. Everybody worships at least something. Everyone has at least one thing, or maybe a couple of things that they honour above all else. For some it might be a football team, some fans will follow their team all around the world to watch them play. Their emotions will be tied up with the team's success on the field, their money will be spent on getting all the gear and buying the tickets, their web-browsers will have bookmarks on all the right football sites. Their whole life and identity is focused on the team, it's a form of worship. And the Bible understands that people can treat money in exactly the same way. For some, the desire for wealth is so strong that it colours everything: from the type of career they pursue and the amount of time they spend there, to the types of emotions they feel when they look at their bank balance.

The worship of money becomes really serious when wealth becomes a person's key source of hope; when their confidence in the future is determined by their financial position. One of the observations that I hear from missionaries who work in other cultures is that idol worship is often driven by worry and anxiety. People are anxious about family and friends, about harvests and the weather, and so they turn to their local gods in order to find some sort of comfort.

And it's exactly the same in our own culture. What drives our worship of money? Often there's an underlying form of anxiety, isn't there? Investment companies often leverage our anxiety in their advertising: "Will you have enough to retire on?" they ask us. But how does the Bible tell us to deal with our anxieties? The Bible tells us to bring them before God in prayer, doesn't it? 1 Peter 5:7 Cast your anxieties before him, because he cares for you. And Philippians 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in all things, through prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

This is why Paul sees greed as a form of false worship, as a form of idolatry. Sometimes we get ourselves into the situation where money replaces God—money is our obsession, money is our saviour, money is what we rely on—and so we grab onto as much of it as we can. Can see why for someone in that position generosity might be hard to practice.

Turn to the Old Testament and you'll hear just how foolish idol worship is. Isaiah 44 paints a great picture of an idol maker. We're asked to imagine him in his workshop, where he takes a block of wood and splits it down the middle. Half of it he uses for

a fire to keep himself warm, he even cooks his dinner on top of it. And then the other half he uses to make a statue that he worships. From the same block we have both kindling and a god! Isaiah thinks this is ridiculous. No one stops to think, he says in 44.19, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" <sup>20</sup> Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"

Idol worship is such a forlorn hope. We invest so much confidence in the things other than the one true God but in the end they can't replace him. That much is true for statues made of wood, and it's also true for Gods that are made out of money. The teacher of Ecclesiastes knew all about the false hope of money. In our first reading this morning we heard these words, Ecclesiastes 5.12 The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether they eat little or much, but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep. We spoke before how the pursuit of wealth is often a product of our anxiety. But Ecclesiastes observes that wealth can actually add to our worries, those who have wealth will often be up at night worrying about it!

The writer also underscores just how fragile our wealth can be <sup>13</sup> I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: he writes, wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners,<sup>14</sup> or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when they have children there is nothing left for them to inherit. <sup>15</sup> Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands. Ecclesiastes is making the point that money has a habit of disappearing, if not before the grave, then certainly at your life's end.

The comedian Jerry Seinfeld has a great piece on this. He's speaking about moving house, and he says that when you move life becomes about boxes. You're always on the lookout for boxes. He says you might be at a funeral, and you'll see the coffin, and you'll think "*That's a good box! Its got some good handles there*". And then he says this, and this is profound. He says "And that's what death is really. It's the last big move of your life. The hearse is like the van. The pall-bearers are your close friends (the only ones you could ask to help you with a big move like that), and the casket is that great perfect box you've been waiting for your whole life. The only problem is, once you find it, you're in it."

When it's time to go, you're not taking any of that wealth with you. What a lousy God to put your trust in! Gods are meant to be the one thing you can rely on in the afterlife, they're not meant to drop off before you get there! So friends the Bible wants us to be wise about the place of money. To not exalt it as a kind of savior, and to learn to resist the kind of anxious thinking that suggests we might not have enough.

One habit that I'm trying to form is to make sure I ask myself a series of questions before I make a purchase. We all have weak spots when it comes to shopping. There are always certain stores that we can't resist walking into. Maybe you love buying music, maybe you love buying clothes, for me it's books: I love spending time in

bookshops—new book shops, used book shops—and it follows that I’m always tempted to add to my library. As a minister, I find it easy to justify. Ministers use books all the time! But if I’m honest I have to admit that on my shelf there are heaps of books that I’ve never read, but I’ve bought them because in the bookshop I’ve thought “That looks interesting, and I think I might need this one day!” But if it’s a book that’s never been opened, it’s a complete waste of money. All it becomes is a really expensive way to decorate a wall—those book spines don’t get you much wall coverage—a foolish use of money.

And so now what I do is that I ask a series of questions before I invest in it:

1. Will I actually use it? *Looks interesting* is not enough. I’ll have to read it or be confident that I’ll use it as a reference tool in my work.
2. Is it a fad? Is this just the latest must have book or is it a classic that I can be sure will repay my reading of it.
3. Can I get away with reading or using something I already own?
4. Can I borrow it? I’ve rediscovered libraries. Library membership forces me to use books properly, to read rather than just own.

And so I’ll only buy the book if it passes these tests. And what I’ve found is that not only does this approach save me money but I’m also training myself to resist the anxiety that says “I must own this!” Perhaps there are other areas where we can apply these questions: Will I actually use it? Is it a fad? Can I get away with something that I own? Can I borrow it?

So those questions may be of help, but ... I think that true freedom from the panic-like greed of money-worship will only come when we re-focus on God and what he has promised us. The true antidote to greed is not more disciplined giving, but faith. Have a listen to Hebrews 13:5 Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, In other words, the writer to the Hebrews is telling us to not buy into the idea that we need to accumulate more and more. Why? Because the verse continues God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” The key to finding freedom from obsessing over wealth is to listen again to the promises of God of the Bible. It’s the God of the Bible who will never leave us, it’s the God of the Bible who will never forsake us. Worldly wealth may come and go as the teacher in Ecclesiastes warned us, but the God of the Bible is the one who we can depend upon.

Think back to those kids in the video that we watched earlier. What was the choice that they faced? They could either trust the promise that they were given—if you wait you will be given even more—or they could reach out and grab hold of what was in front of them. And it’s the same choice we are faced with when it comes to our worship; either we can trust the promises of the Bible, the promises that God can give us what we need and that by believing in Jesus Christ we’ll receive an eternal inheritance, or we reach out and try and find security in the things in front of us: sex, drugs, power, success, overly intense relationships, or financial wealth.

I think it's only after we foster that faith in Christ that we can start to be cheerfully and openly generous. This is the pattern of the generous giver in Psalm 112. We read this psalm last week, but I'd like us to think about it again. We're told the character of Psalm 112 scatters his gifts to the poor. He (or she) is like Santa Claus emptying a big sack, gifts going everywhere. What makes the character depicted in this Psalm so darn generous? Psalm 112:7 They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD. <sup>8</sup>Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear. You see the anxiety and fear that causes people to hold onto all their stuff, that's been dissolved by their trust in the Lord. Because they know that God has their future in hand, they feel the freedom to let go of what they have. There's no longer any reason to be greedy, but they do have every reason to be generous.

If Walter Mischel was able to conduct his experiment with Bible characters, I reckon one kid who would have eaten the marshmallow straight away would have been Esau. Do you remember Esau, brother of Jacob, son of Issac? Here's a painting of Jacob and Esau's interaction from Genesis 25. Jacob is making some delicious stew and his brother Esau walks in famished and says "I'd like some of that stew". Jacob senses an opportunity, "Sell me your birth-right as the first born". Esau says, "Yeah I don't care, I'm about to die here", and so he swaps the promise of something great for something immediate and transitory. Utter foolishness.

And friends, such is the foolishness of greed. Why exchange the promises of God for something as transitory as wealth? Greed is always so short-sighted, so listen again to the promise of God: "never will he leave us, never will he forsake us". Know that he's the one who has our future, so trust in him, and let yourself be generous!