

EXTREME SPIRITUAL MAKEOVER:
FROM GREED TO GENEROSITY

Mark 10:17-27

Dr. J. Howard Olds

March 12, 2006

Author and spiritual director Richard Foster says, "The great moral question of our time is how to move from greed to generosity." That's what we would like to talk about today.

GREED: the Bible calls it avarice, or covetousness. Greed is the gratification of my desires often at the expense of the common good. We all have a need for greed. We are born to be greedy.

It would be easy today to talk about the greediness of Enron executives who are on trial for pocketing millions of dollars. It would be convenient today to criticize the extravagant life styles of the rich and famous, the music stars, the football heroes, who live and work in this community. That's not what I intend to do.

I want talk about me. I want to talk about you. I want to talk about those personal desires and hidden needs that live inside the best of us. I want to talk about the deadly sins of Christians. We are born with the need to get.

We have a new granddaughter in our family. I mentioned that last week, but some of you were not here. She's eight months old, big enough to crawl and get around on her own. She has an older sister who is 26 months, the center of attention, the star of the family. When Brad called the other night, I asked, "How's Ella handling the new addition to the family?" "Well, so-so!" said Brad. She likes to count Caroline's toes, but when it's bedtime, she gathers up all her toys and hides them in her bedroom so Caroline can't play with them. Greed. It runs in the human family. We are born to be greedy, to get. We are taught to be greedy. It's the American way.

ABC pulled KFC's latest advertisement off television because of its blatant subliminal message to be solved by the viewer in exchange for a free sandwich. I found that sort of interesting because I thought all advertisements had subliminal messages. If you want to look young, feel happy, be accepted, or prove yourself smart enough to grab a good bargain, run over to our store for a sale for a limited time only and make this purchase.

What appears to be extravagant today becomes something nice to have tomorrow. In a matter of time, the product becomes something I really need only to evolve to something I cannot live without. I've got to have it. Welcome to American capitalism.

Michael Douglas, playing Gordon Gekko in the movie Wall Street, addresses a stockholders meeting by saying: “The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed, for lack of a better term, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. And greed will save the United States of America.” Now, if that were just a movie maybe we could laugh it off. But I have a suspicion it may be more into the core of our way of living than we want to admit. We’re taught to be greedy. It makes the world go around.

Even more than that, we want to be greedy, it seems to me. Who wants to be a millionaire? We all do, don’t we? I keep watching the reruns of that game show on the Game Channel. I know the answers to a lot of the questions. I sit there in my little fantasy world, relaxing in my lounge chair, thinking if I could get on that show I even know the answers to those questions at \$250,000 and half a million dollars. If I only had a chance, I might win a million dollars. I could be a millionaire, if I were lucky enough to answer that question. We all want to be greedy, don’t we? We like it. It feels good.

My problem with the lottery is that it preys on people’s need for greed. It’s a secular substitute for grace. It’s a poor man’s stock market. If I could just hit the Power Ball jackpot, I could have it made. Somebody’s going to win. It might as well be you! So, we educate our children by chance financed by somebody’s bad luck. When greed infects religion it stoops even lower. God wants you to be rich and to live in His favor. Ask and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Send in your gifts today and expect a check in the mail tomorrow. Why not have your mansion here below as well as up above. Religion is about faith, not fiction. It’s not about getting what you and I want, it’s about doing what God wants. Greed sneaks its way right into our belief system. The only antidote I know for greed is generosity.

AN INVITATION TO GENEROSITY

Transformation starts with a desire for something more. Verse 17: *As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* Verse 21: *And Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing...”*

What do you do when you have it all? You look for something else. You could find yourself in this story. The Rich Young Ruler had it all together. He could have lived in Brentwood. He was rich. I don’t know what it is to be rich. But I do know the difference between having nothing and living comfortably. I’d a lot rather live comfortably than without anything. I know how we play those stories with our kids, “You don’t know how hard it was when I was a kid.” While I like to tell my children about the good old days, in reality they were not so hot. I’d rather live comfortably.

He was young. His life loomed before him. He had a whole life to look forward to. He was a ruler. He had power and prestige. He spoke and things happened. He was a ruler. He was righteous. When Jesus said keep the commandments, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't bear false witness, don't covet your neighbor's possessions, this man responds in Verse 20: "*Teacher I have kept all these since my youth.*" Could you say that? I couldn't. He was young; he was rich; he was righteous; he had it all going for him and yet in the midst of all of this, he comes to the One he calls Teacher and says there is something missing. Can you help me? And Jesus, loving him, says you are right; there is something that is lacking in your life.

Rabbi Harold Kushner gave us the book Why Bad Things Happen to Good People. That was not his best book, not the book I liked the best. It was a less popular title, When All You've Ever Wanted is Not Enough. In it he said, "Money and power do not satisfy that unnamable hunger of the soul. Even the rich and the powerful find themselves yearning for something more. They know something the rest of us have yet to discover. "If we have it all, we still won't be happy."

Somebody needs to write a new book. Not on how to be happy, we don't need another book on how to be successful, we don't need another book on how to manage well. We need a book on how to be human, how to live as a loved child of God. We need a book on how to be content with enough. We could use a book like that.

Transformation happens when we make a decision to be generous. The only antidote for greed is generosity. Listen to Jesus. Verse 21: "*You lack one thing. Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.*" Verse 22: *At this the man's face fell. He went away sad because he had great wealth.* Ouch! Wow, Whoa, Wait a minute. Hold on. Let's talk. Could we reconsider? Let's have a discussion about this. The extravagance is radical. The young man is sad.

This kind of talk scares me. I would have said it differently. I would have suggested he increase his pledge next year. Would you consider tithing your income? I would have said maybe you ought to make God your Senior Partner in business.

When people come to me talking about the "all" stuff, they bother me. It makes me a little frightened. They come in and sit down in my office and say I want to pitch in my occupation and pack up my family, and go to seminary, or strike out for Costa Rica as friends of mine did. My palms get a little sweaty when they start talking like that. They are in the middle of their lives and I find myself saying something like maybe you could volunteer to teach Jr. High Sunday school or maybe go on a mission trip and test it out for a week or maybe you could give a devotion at the Nashville Rescue Mission downtown. But what's this "all" stuff? Radical discipleship leaves me reeling.

Then I remember there are some places in my life when I want it all. Sometimes all means all. When I came to after they operated on my brain, I only wanted to know one question. Did you get it all? When a pilot is bringing a plane that I'm riding on into the runway, I don't want to know if you got close, I want to know if you hit it. When I come to church I sing "All to Jesus, I surrender; all to him I freely give." What part of "all" don't I understand?

Jesus wasn't pulling any punches about this. He turned around to his disciples and said I've got news for you, it's almost impossible for you people who have money to get into the kingdom of God. Verse 23: *How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!* Verse 25: *It's like stuffing a camel through the eye of a needle.* Hard. Tough. Demanding. I didn't write it, Jesus said it. Why? Because radical problems call for extreme makeovers. It takes some crunching for all of us self-sufficient people to admit our need for God. It takes the Holy Spirit to teach us how to know what is right and what things we need what things we ought to let go.

It takes a spiritual compass, a counter-cultural way of life to do what Paul said in Romans 12:2: *Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* For as of all people, Bob Hope said, "If you don't have charity in you heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble anybody could ever have." Transformation happens when we dare to trust God.

Greed is grounded in fear. We fear we will not have the fundamental necessities of life — food, shelter, safety, stability — so we keep saving for a rainy day. When is enough, enough?

Meanwhile, Jesus says "relax," don't be so preoccupied with getting. If God gives attention to the wild flowers of the field, don't you think he'll give some attention to you? Has anyone, by fussing in front of the mirror, ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? Seek first the Kingdom of God. Don't worry about tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

Are we willing to live by our national motto inscribed on our coins "In God We Trust"? Do we or don't we? Isn't that the real question of life? What's impossible with us is possible with God.

The year was 1861. Our nation was engaged in a bloody civil war. Then Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase sent a letter which in part said, "No nation can be strong except in the strength of God, or safe except in his defense. The trust of our people should be declared on our national coins," so originated the words "In God We Trust." Why? Because what's impossible for you and me is totally within the realm of possibility for God, for with God nothing is impossible. Even rich people like you and me can get in the kingdom of God. Thank God for his grace. That's the word of the Lord as I understand it. May God reveal the real truth to you.

Let us pray. Thank you, Lord, for loving us, thank you for forgiving us, thank you for pulling us away from things that will not last. Teach us, O Lord, today to simply trust in you. Amen.