

### AVARICE

Some years ago, there was a court case in which a married couple, both of whom were head teachers, were found guilty of systematically plundering their schools of material intended for the schools' use. They owned two houses, one in the town and one by the seaside, and both were so crammed with the goods they had stolen that it was almost impossible to move around the house normally.

What an incredible story; how can one explain their actions? Both in important positions, well paid, yet they couldn't control their acquisitive instinct. Their besetting sin was avarice, or covetousness.

Warnings against avarice occur throughout the Bible, from the 10 Commandments in Genesis – "Do not covet your neighbour's household; you must not covet your neighbour's wife, his slave, his slave-girl, his ox, his donkey, or anything that belongs to him." Gen 20:17; to the word of our Lord: "Beware! Be on your guard against greed of every kind, for even when someone has more than enough, his possessions do not give him life." Lk 12: 15; and to St Paul, writing to the Colossians, said: "So put to death those parts of you which belong to the earth – fornication, indecency, lust evil desires, and the ruthless greed which is nothing less than idolatry." Col 3: 5. And, of course, there is the story Jesus told of the rich landowner, the reading for this evening.

Avarice is a positive sin, because it desires and seeks to obtain, by fair means or foul, what others have. Often this is money, but it could be sexual greed, as seen in the compulsive womaniser. A miser, in his desire to have, will kill love, and will revel in his sense of power as he grasps for whatever is desired. Today it shows itself by the person who accumulates money, without any appreciation of the responsibility of the true value this has; it is the person with deep pockets and short arms; it shows itself in a reluctance in paying bills. In short, avarice makes a god of possession either of things or people. It contrasts with evil, which is a negative sin, which grieves at another's good fortune, or finds satisfaction at another's misfortune, but doesn't seek to do anything about it.

The life of Howard Hughes illustrates all this well. All he ever wanted was more – so he created billion-dollar pile of assets; he wanted more fame, so became a film-maker and star; he wanted more sensual pleasure and was able to exploit his sexual urges; he wanted more thrills, so built the fastest plane in the world; he wanted more power, so exploited his wealth in dealing political favours and two American presidents became his political pawns. And was he satisfied? His life ended as an emaciated figure, with uncut fingernails, rotting teeth, addicted to drugs – a billionaire junkie, made insane by his avaricious cravings.

Getting and spending are, for many people, the most significant things they do. Avarice is very much a sin of a world indifferent to the things of God, putting a person's own desires before anyone or anything else. What a contrast with God's generous love, which seeks a response in self-giving by those who trust in him, so building relationship.

It is a feature of our society, and perhaps has always been a temptation, to judge a person's worth by the size of their bank balance, their house, car, or designer handbag! This desire for more, shows itself also in the way that people are used, with little regard for their well-being. The avaricious are exploiters of people and situations, with little regard for the damage they cause to others.

Today, we do not have idols carved in stone and wood, but we make idols of all sorts of things to which we pay the most worth, and for the greedy, it is money. If you hold a 5p coin, small as it is in front of your eye, it will blot out the sun. Focus on wealth and we lose sight of God.

You'll remember the contrast between the things money can buy, but which can't obtain the most desirable human needs:

Money can buy a house, but not a home;  
 Money can buy insurance, but not give you security;  
 Money can buy entertainment, but not happiness;  
 Money can buy medicine, but not health;  
 Money can buy you a bed, but not sleep;  
 Money can buy you companionship, but not friendship;  
 Money can buy sex, but not love.

Avarice can take two forms – it can be miserly, or spendthrift. The miser will often have a spartan life-style, with much discomfort, in order to protect what he has. The spendthrift, on the other hand, will pour out money in order to obtain possessions, a sense of belonging, of being “in the swim”, of being important. Both have the failing that these people do not engender love, rather they kill love. How many marriages die because one of the couple is unable to give love, only receive it? During the lockdown due to Covid 19, many of the wealthy were reported to be spending large sums getting bigger and better things that they already had.

Much of modern society revolves around avarice – the adverts which play on our insecurities or promise what they can never deliver; they feed our longings, promise a bogus status, hold out a chance of happiness they are simply unable to achieve.

The temptation to follow the worldly way is strong –I'm sure all of us feel its lure. It isn't that the material world is to be condemned – far from it. The material matters – after all, we are ourselves very much part of that world. Money is essential for reasonable living; it's where the focus lies – is it with self, or is it beyond self to encompass both God and those with whom we share our lives? In the end, it comes down to ethics, which define how we live with others.

In 1923, nine of the world's richest men in America, met in a Chicago hotel. Because of their wealth, they were some of the most powerful men in the USA – the president of the New York Stock Exchange, the head of the world's biggest monopoly, the presidents of the largest American steel corporation, electricity company and gas company, a powerful wheat baron, president of an international bank, and the Secretary of the Interior. These men were

the envy of many. By 1948, one of the men was insane, two had recently been released from prison, three others were bankrupt, and the remaining three had committed suicide.

Here are two stories of John Wesley. The first tells of Wesley giving a sermon to a congregation of country people. The first point he made was “make all you can”. A farmer turned to his neighbour and nodded in agreement. The second point was “save all you can”. Again, the farmer nodded to his neighbour. His third point was “give all you can”. The farmer turned to his neighbour and said “Now he’s spoiled it!”

The second is about John Wesley himself. His lifestyle shows how it is possible to avoid the materialistic trap. He liked to preach on Matt 6: 19-23 “Do not store up riches for yourself here on earth.” He said that any Christian who takes for him- or herself anything more than the plain necessities of life, lives in an open and habitual denial of the Lord, that person has gained riches and hell-fire!

Wesley lived as he preached. Sales of his books made £1400 annually, but he spent only £30 on himself; the rest he gave away. He always wore inexpensive clothes, ate simple food. He said: “If I leave behind me £10, you and all mankind bear witness against me that I lived and died a thief and a robber.”

Listening to that makes me ask myself is there hope for any of us? It lies in the power of the gospel to answer our basic need, to help us overcome the insecurity which drives so much avarice as we become aware of God’s love in Christ. “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well.” It is that relationship which brings wholeness and true sense of belonging.