

When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you, and put a knife in your throat if you're given to gluttony. Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive. Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches and they are gone, or they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.

Do not eat the food of a stingy man; do not crave his delicacies for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost. "Eat and drink," he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments.

Would you take a Bible and turn to the book of Proverbs this morning, the 23rd chapter? Proverbs 23.

True story, OK? In 2002, a 62 year-old man walked into the Cholet (chalet) General Hospital in western France complaining of severe stomach pain and swelling. After taking an x-ray, the doctors were shocked to discover a huge opaque mass in his stomach. The patient had swallowed about 350 coins, \$650.00 worth, along with assorted necklaces and needles.

One of his doctors, Bruno Francois, said the patient had swallowed the coins over the course of a decade. Francois said that when the patient was invited into other people's homes, he liked to steal coins and eat them,"

There is a name for this compulsion: it's called *pica*, which comes from the Latin word for magpie, which is a bird thought to eat just about anything. According to Dr. Francois, Pica can take the form of eating dirt, ashes, chalk, hair, soap, toothbrushes, burned matches...just about anything. Francois once treated a patient who even ate forks.

The mass in this patient's stomach weighed 12 pounds. It was so heavy that it had stretched his stomach down between his hips. As the doctors tried to remove the mass, they discovered that the patient's stomach was so badly damaged that it had to be removed as well. But the man could not be saved. He died twelve days later.¹

Can you imagine? We think, "Why would anyone be so foolish as to kill himself by eating coins?"

And yet, how many people today are dying from essentially the same disease? The disease has been called avarice, which is just a nice way of saying "greed."

In His book, *God and Mammon in America*, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow claims that, according to his research, 86 percent of Americans agree that greed is sin. Yet 80 percent of Americans say that they wished they had a lot more money. So, the vast majority of Americans are somehow able to say, "I'm not greedy...I just want a lot more money."

And maybe the most disturbing part of Wuthnow's research is that, regarding greed, there is no measurable difference between those inside and those outside the church.^{2,3}

¹ www.cnn.com/2004/HEALTH/02/18/coin.eater.ap/index.html

² Wuthnow, Robert. 1996. *God and mammon in America*. New York, NY: Free Press.

³ www.princeton.edu/~paw/archive_old/PAW95-96/01_9596/0913note.html

In just the past five years, I don't know how many unhappy people I've talked with who were suffering in all sorts of ways because of greed. They want to live lifestyles beyond their means, and they're ruining their marriages, their families, and their health to pay for them. All the junk that they've bought through the years now owns them, so they work two and three jobs to pay for it all. There's an enormous amount of stress in their lives because they worry, "How are we going to pay this bill? Where is this money coming from?"

And because they work two or three jobs, there's an equally enormous amount of guilt in their lives because they never see their kids or their elderly parents or their friends.

Our appetites are killing us, you see? Just like the guy eating the coins.

And this is the very point of this proverb we're looking at today: Our appetites can kill us. Greed kills.

Look at verse 1 there: *"When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you're given to gluttony. Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive."*

Greed kills; and one thing that *greed kills is our witness*. Christianity (and Judaism, for that matter) is a religion that says we have faith in a God that provides for us all that we need. In contrast, greed takes advantage of opportunities to hoard all that we can for ourselves.

The image here in this verse is that of a person invited to a feast by someone of influence. How disgusting it is, you've seen it and so have I, when people plow through plate after plate of food just because it's there – they want to get all they can. What does that kind of behavior say to the host of the banquet? Part of it is just a testimony to poor manners, which damages our witness too. But the more important issue is what that kind of behavior says about our God – that He must *not* be able to provide for us daily since we have to hoard everything we can...we have to get it while the getting's good.

That's not the message Christians are to send to the world about our God – we're to trust Him daily – like the Israelites did with the manna in the wilderness. Hoarding tells the world that we're living in fear; it tells that world that we're prepared, just in case our God may *not* really be able to save us in a pinch. You see, greed kills our witness.

We also see in this verse that *greed kills our perspective*. "Don't crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive." Greed bends our perspective – it makes us think bad things are OK. It's a trick of the enemy that, if left unchecked, will eventually destroy our integrity.

"Well, it was just a little lie...and it must have been OK to tell it...look at all the money I made on that deal!"

“Yeah, I told them I had more experience than I really do, but now that I got the job, everything will be fine.”

James Patterson and Peter Kim, in their book, *“The Day America Told the Truth,”* asked people what they would do to get \$10,000,00.00.

- 25% of those that responded said they would abandon their entire family for \$10,000,000.00
- 25% said they would abandon their church
- 23% said they would become prostitutes for a week or more
- 16% said they would leave their spouses
- 10% said they would withhold their testimony and let a murderer go free
- 7% said they would kill a stranger
- 3% said they would put their children up for adoption⁴

Greed kills our perspective about what’s right and wrong. It causes us to be able to somehow justify decisions that we know are wrong – that, if someone else did it, there’s no question we would call it wrong.

Verse 4 there: *“Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches and they are gone, or they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.”*

⁴ Patterson, James and Peter Kim. 1991. *The day America told the truth: what people really believe about everything that really matters.* New York, NY: Prentice Hall

Greed kills our witness. Greed kills our perspective, and *greed can ultimately kill us.* We wear ourselves out trying to get rich. Proverbs says, “Don’t do it.”

Too many of us work too many hours. We carry too much stress – all for the sake of making money to buy things that we don’t truly need, or that our children don’t truly need. And so we don’t have time for rest. We don’t have time for exercise. The heart attack rates in our country paint the picture for us – inside and outside the church, we are very willing to sacrifice everything to live this lifestyle.

And for what? In the eternal perspective, is it really worth it? Is living this lifestyle really worth all the health problems, and maybe even an early death? Is it worth it, to leave a wife or husband without a spouse? To leave children without a father or mother?

And even if it doesn’t kill us, all that stress and pressure affects our families...we’ve tried to tell ourselves it doesn’t, but we know it does. Getting home at 8 or 9 or 10 every night...snapping at the kids because we’re tired. Do we really want to instill those values into our children?

I think of the Harry Chapin song, *Cat’s in the Cradle*, anybody remember that? It’s a song, sung by a father, who never had time to spend with his son.

“My son turned ten just the other day, he said, ‘Thanks for the ball Dad, c’mon let’s play. Can you teach me to throw?’ I said, ‘Not today. I’ve got a lot to do.’ He said, ‘That’s OK.’ And as he walked away, his smile never dimmed. He said, ‘I’m gonna be like him, yeah; you know I’m gonna be like him.’”

“And the cat’s in the cradle and the silver spoon, little boy blue and the man in the moon. ‘When you coming home dad?’ ‘I don’t know when, but we’ll get together then, son. You know we’ll have a good time then.’”

Several little stories go by as the son grows up, and then the last verse says:

“I’ve long since retired; my son’s moved away...I called him up just the other day. I said, ‘I’d like to see you if you don’t mind.’ He said, ‘I’d love to Dad, if I could find the time. You see, my new jobs a hassle and the kids have the flu, but it’s sure nice talking to you, Dad. It’s been sure nice talking to you.’ And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me: my boy is just like me. My boy is just like me.”

“And the cat’s in the cradle and the silver spoon, little boy blue and the man in the moon. ‘When you coming home, son?’ ‘I don’t know when, but we’ll get together then, Dad. You know we’ll have a good time then.’”

I realize that there are other reasons we sometimes can’t see family as we’d like, but greed is one of the big, unnecessary reasons. It’s a reason that we can do something about.

And, by the way, just as the song suggests, if we were raised in greedy homes, then we will make greedy homes until we choose to break the cycle. We’ll replicate what we know unless we do something to stop it.

Greed kills our witness, it kills our perspective, it kills us, physically, in some form, and finally, ***greed kills our faith.***

The truth is, we only have so much time allotted to us. The devil knows that, and he uses greed to try to envelop all of our time, so none is left for devotions, for worship, for fellowship with God’s people, for prayer. He catches us up in this cycle, and so if we don’t work Sundays...if we don’t work Wednesday nights, we can’t make the house payment and the car payments and the credit card payments. It doesn’t take long before we lose the joy in giving – it becomes a threat. We lose compassion for people, we lose our sense of dependence upon God, and the love in our hearts for others dries up. It’s a bleak picture, but it’s not an exaggeration. It’s what God wants to save us from, because it really is true, we cannot serve both God and money.

Greed kills our witness, it kills our perspective, it kills us, at worst, physically, and at best, relationally, and it kills our faith.

So, are you greedy? Greed is the desire to accumulate more than God has planned for us, and this certainly applies to every area of life, but it's especially pronounced in our finances and possessions.

Let me suggest four, simple warning signs that tell us that we might be falling into greed, OK?

The first sign is that *we consistently spend more than we make*. Now, I'm not talking about the unexpected hospital bill or the car repair. I'm talking about being overdrawn month after month – having nothing left but credit card bills on the 30th or 31st. Consistently spending more than we make is a sign of a lifestyle that needs help, and it *may* be a sign of greed.

Second, we may be falling into greed when *we're willing to compromise our values to get ahead*. What is falling apart in your life so that you can have *just a little bit more*? Is it your family? Is it your integrity? Is it your witness to the world? Paul writes to Timothy, "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction."⁵ Are you doing things you're ashamed of to make more money? Are you compromising your values to get ahead? Then greed is close to you.

⁵ 1 Timothy 6:9

Third, we may be falling into greed when *we're not giving generously*. Someone once said, "You can see into the heart of a man through what's written in his checkbook." That's true. It's true for women, too. If you're ashamed of what's written there, or of what's *not* written there, then maybe you need to examine this issue in your life. Greed may be a problem if we're not giving generously.

Finally, we may be falling into greed when *we're preoccupied with making, spending, or saving money*. Now, it's not a sin to make money. In fact, we're responsible to work to provide for ourselves and our families. It's not a sin to make money. It's not a sin to make a lot of money. It's not a sin to spend money. It's not a sin to save money. But in your heart of hearts, you know if these things preoccupy you or not. Deep down, you know if these things *consume* you. If you're *obsessed* with making money or spending money or saving money; if these compulsions are negatively affecting other areas of your life, then you have a problem with greed.

And so what do we do? If you think you have a problem with greed, what do you do?

Please, know this: God wants to deliver you from greed. You can trust Him to do the right thing in your life. God knows the pressure you're under and He wants to lift that from you. He wants to give you peace. With His help, the drive for more can end right here, today. Does that sound good to you? Here's where it starts:

First, acknowledge that there is an issue, and that it's a spiritual issue. The solution doesn't lie merely in better management or psychotherapy – the solution is a changed heart toward whatever it is you crave – be it food or money, attention, status, stuff...whatever. And only God can change your heart. Ask Him to search your heart and confirm to you that there's a problem. He will – He'll let us know if we're honest with Him and with ourselves. Open your heart to the voice and to the discipline of God.

Second, we need to repent...to ask God for forgiveness, because greed is sin. Paul says in Colossians that greed is idolatry, and if we're to live in harmony with God, we must put it to death.⁶ God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins...He stands ready to forgive, but we must ask for forgiveness.

Third, we need to turn away from greedy habits. We need to ask God to help us identify specific places where greed has crept into our lives, and to give us divine power to deal with those – to turn away from desires and lifestyles and commitments that encourage greed. What do we need to get rid of? What can't we honestly afford? With God's help, we need to make some hard decisions about the lifestyle we'll pursue from this point forward.

Finally, we should get some guidance and accountability and maybe some training. There are counselors in the church that can help with this. They're

⁶ Colossians 3:5

trustworthy people who will keep confidence. Ask one of the pastors about getting some guidance here – we'll be happy to work with you.

This is an important spiritual issue that too many people ignore today, but it affects every area of life. Is God calling you to take a step toward Him...a step of obedience...a step away from greed and all the junk that it brings to life? Let God deliver you this morning from greed – let Him bring order and peace to your heart.

There is a place of quiet rest, where sin cannot molest
Joy and peace –

If greed is robbing your peace, if it keeps you from rest...

497 Near to the Heart of God