

October 16, 2011 - Greed vs. Mercy

I just passed out three containers and inside each container there's some quarters. If you would, please take four quarters out of that bin and then pass it on to the next person. I need everyone to have four quarters. If you can do that as quickly as possible and pass those around I would appreciate that.

We're in the middle of a series called "Battlefront" and it's been a couple of weeks since we've actually talked on this subject, so I just want to do a review this morning. There is a battle going on, there is a war going on around us and we cannot escape this battle. We are in the middle of it and we are in the heart of it and we just can't avoid it or get away from it. Your heart and mind is where the battle is being fought and your heart and mind is what the battle is being fought over. So, you are right in the middle of this and you can't escape it. Both sides are kind of lobbying for your allegiance and they are doing so with the same message. And the message that both sides are sending to you is that, life on this side is full and it's abundant and it's as good as it gets and it's the way that it was meant to be. And, if you go to the other side, you are going to be missing out on what you really want to have. Both sides are kind of sending us that same message. We've been looking at several battle lines, if you will, where this battle is going on and how both sides launch their attack and lobby for our allegiance at these critical points

This morning we're going to look at another one of those battle lines so that is why we need the quarters. Here's what I need you to do. Hold both your hands open, palms up. Very good. You should have four quarters floating mysteriously between your two hands. So, what we are going to do, I tried to make this as simple as possible. Your right hand is going to be your 'receiving' hand and your left hand is going to be your 'letting go' hand. Since you've just received four quarters, put your four quarters into your right hand. Now, I just need to clarify. Those four quarters are yours. A gift for you. No string attached. I don't expect them back. They are yours. Alright. Now, having said that. If I said 'in a minute, we're going to take up a collection for some noble and worthy cause, maybe famine relief, or natural disaster relief, or maybe education for kids in third world countries'. If I said that right now, how many of your four quarters, of your one dollar, would go into your left hand, your 'let go' hand, to go into that special collection that we are going to take in a minute. Okay. Actually do it. Now, you need to use your imagination a little bit. What if, instead of \$1.00 I gave you \$10.00? And so those quarters represent a \$2.50 bill. So, imagine that that one dollar is actually \$10.00 and I say the same thing. "We're going to take up a collection for some noble and worthy cause." How many of those \$2.50 coins would stay in your left hand and how many would slip back into your right? Go ahead and do it. Don't watch your neighbour, just go ahead and do it. Now, instead of \$10.00 what if I gave you \$1,000.00. And so now those are \$250.00 coins each, in your hand. If that was a \$1,000.00 in your hand, how many of the coins would be in the 'let it go and put in the basket hand' and how many would be in the 'I'm going to hang on to this and get something I need hand'?

Now, what if it was \$100,000.00. Which means that each one of those coins is a \$25,000.00

coin. How many of those coins would be in your 'let it go' hand and 'into the basket hand'? And how many would be in your right hand to buy that new furnace your house needs? To buy the car that just broke down on you? To send your kids to college? To do one of a number of things that are really good things and things you need to do and 25 or 50 thousand dollars could go a long way to make that happen. Honestly, be honest with yourself. Put your quarters in your left hand and your right hand. What would you do if I gave you \$100,000.00 today and said "You choose". Okay. You got your coins in your hands. Take your right hand put it in your pocket or your purse, or whatever and let go of the coins and take your hand out. Take your left hand and put the coins in the basket we are passing around. Now, if you were being honest with yourself and if you are like most people, odds are, when we started out, and I gave you the dollar they all started in your right hand. Then I said "We're going to give to some noble cause, how many of your quarters will go to your left hand?" Odds are, most of you probably put most of your quarters in your left hand. "It's no big deal, it's only a buck, we'll put it in the left hand and put it in the basket". But, if you are like most people and if you are being honest with yourself, I'm guessing what happened with a lot of you was, as the dollar amount went up, that I was giving you, more and more of those coins started slipping back into that right hand.

Now, the reason I bring all that up, there's a universal belief there that we need to discuss and a myth we need to disprove this morning. And it is a myth that a lot of us buy in to and it's the myth that "If I had a little bit more, then I would be able to give more." If I had a little bit more, then I would be able to share some more. But the truth is and there have been studies upon studies done on this, that, in reality, the more people have, the more income people have, generally speaking the amount of that income that they give away to Church and to charities and to things like that, actually decreases with the more that we have. And here's the thing. Getting more doesn't dull our desire to have more. And getting more doesn't necessarily make us happy with what we have. You see, greed is a very intangible thing. If you think back to that exercise that we just did with the quarters, the hard thing to discern is as quarters were passing back and forth from one hand to the other, at what point does that become greed? Is it at the \$1.00 level and I put a couple quarters in this hand? Is it at the \$1,000.00 level and I go 50-50? Is it at the \$100,000.00 level when I keep some and give some? At what point does something become greed? How many quarters do you keep before you are being greedy? And to answer that question, we really need to define what greed is all about.

We've talked previously, a couple weeks ago, about 'envy'. And envy is specifically: Me believing that if I could have what you have, I would be happy. We're going to talk in a couple of weeks, about gluttony. And gluttony is all about indulgence. Gluttony says 'If I just simply consume enough I will be happy.' But greed, greed is all about getting more. If I just get a little bit more, I'll be happy.

Leo Tolstoy tells a story about a man who was a peasant farmer and was very unsatisfied with his lot in life and life in general. One day, someone came along and made him this fantastic offer. He said "For a thousand Rubels, I will give you all the land that you can walk across in one day". So the farmer thought "this is a great deal, I'm going to take it." The man said, "There's only

one condition, you have to walk the entire distance and the second condition is, you have to be back to your starting point by sundown.” So, the next morning, bright and early, as the sun came up the man started walking. And he walked feverishly and jogging a little bit, intermittently, and he was going as fast as he could so he could cover as much ground as he could cover. Because every step he got was one more piece of land that he was gaining for himself. Around noon, his pace started to slow down but he pushed himself onward because he knew “if I can just get a little bit farther and a little bit farther then I’ll have that much more land.” Towards the middle of the afternoon he knew he should start turning back but he kept taking one more step, one more step, till he finally said “That’s it. That’s all I can do.” So, he turns around and he starts to head for home. So he turns around and he starts going and by this time he’s been walking all day and he’s getting very tired and he’s slowing down, and he’s slowing down. As the sun is starting to set in the sky he can see his starting point and he just forces himself to get back to that starting point by the time the sun sets. And finally, he makes it just as the sun goes down, he gets back to his starting point and then collapses in exhaustion. And the story that Tolstoy tells says that “he collapses in exhaustion and right there, within a few minutes, dies.” And the name of the story is “How much Land Does a Man Need”. You see, greed is what drives us and compels us and tells us that, if you could just get a little more, then you could be happy. If you could just take that one extra step, gain that one extra yard and then, you will be happy. If you just get a little bit more then you will be happy.

And I think, one of the struggles we have with greed is we under estimate the sneakiness of it. Greed is a sneaky, sneaky thing. You see, most people would agree that greed is probably a bad thing. Even those who aggressively acquire life’s accoutrements will caution you that you don’t get too greedy or it will catch up with you. The problem is that we all have a different perspective on greed. What is greedy and what is not. We also all have a changing perspective on what is greedy and what is not.

Here’s what I’ve come to discover about greed and how greed works. This little block here represents what I have. This block represents what I would like to have or what I reasonably think I could expect to have, or deserve to have. Not the pie in the sky dreams, but this is what I could reasonably expect to have. Greed is aspiring to anything above that level. That’s how most of us look at greed. This is what we have. This is what we’d reasonably like to have and greed is anything that goes beyond that amount. Now, what I have and what you have are different. What I think is reasonable to have and what you think is reasonable to expect to have is different. But here’s the sneakiest thing about it. As I get more, what I think is reasonable to have increases and as what I think is reasonable to have increases what I consider to be greedy, rises. You see, greed is sneaky because perspective on it is always changing. Greed is sneaky because it doesn’t matter how much or how little you have, greed is sneaky because it is rooted in the desire for more. The desire for more is something that we all, almost always, have with us. The desire for more is something that we almost all often feel that we’re kind of entitled to. You see, greed tells us that if we can only get just a little bit more, we’ll be happy.

Which brings us to the story that was read earlier. Story about a man who had a bumper crop.

A farmer who had a huge crop and the crop was so huge that he couldn't fit it into his old barns. So he decides to tear down his old barns and build newer bigger better ones. The man says to himself "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and be merry." Or in other words, now that you've got more, or when you build your barns so that you can hold more, then you are going to be happy. Now, there is nothing wrong with having a bumper crop. You know, just like there's nothing wrong with earning a good wage or even having a boat load of money, provided you come by it by honest means. There's not even anything wrong with wanting certain things. There's not even anything wrong with getting certain things in life, but the problem in this story is, that when the man receives more than he needs, he decides that he needs a little more.

Now, I'm pretty comfortable with my conventional understanding of greed. You know, since I decide what is reasonable to desire and what is greed, shockingly, I'm almost never greedy by my own standard. Some of you may be greedy by my standards. I may be greedy by some of your standards. But, by my standards, I am right where I need to be. However, I am much less comfortable with a definition of greed that's simply boiled down to the belief, that getting more will make me happy because I often do believe that. I often do have that feeling inside of me. If I could just get a little bit more of that, then I would be happy. I am often lured by the promise of more. More cash in my bank account. More apps on my phone. More books on my shelf. More square feet in my house. More horsepower in my car. More stamps in my passport. More clothes in my closet. More candy in my trick or treat bag.

And we all live in a world that is constantly bombarding us with the message that all we need to be happy, is just a little bit more. Whether it's diamond jewelry or power tools; china plates, or aluminium siding; spa treatments or sporting events tickets. All we need to be happy---just a little bit more. And judging by the fact that in 2009, Canadians held 72 million credit cards which held 78 billion dollars of debt on them. It would seem that a lot of us are buying in to that idea.

But it's not just about cash and currency. Greed sneaks in to all sorts of areas of our life and gets a foothold. If I could only get a little bit more attention from people. If people would just notice me a little bit more. Then I'd be happy. If I could just get a little bit more affection from people. From that certain someone, if they would just show me a little bit more affection, then...I would be happy. If I could get a little bit more appreciation, then I would be happy. If I got a little bit more admiration. If people would just look up to me a little bit every now and then. Then, I could be happy. If I could just get a little bit more acknowledgement of what I do for this family, for this Church, for this organization, then if I just got a little bit more of that...then I would be happy.

No matter what it is that we're looking to or looking for, that little bit more greed, by it's very nature is setting us up to fail. You see, greed is a scam, it's a con, it's nothing but smoke and mirrors. Greed is the carrot in front of the donkey. They used to put a carrot on a stick in front of the donkey and with every step the donkey took towards the carrot, the carrot moved one step

away from the donkey. And that carrot is whatever it is that greed is telling you. If you get a little bit more of that you will be happy. And if greed is the carrot, guess what that makes us.

Greed prompts us to rest our hopes on happiness on having just a little bit more than we do right now. But that is an unattainable goal. When we trust in greed to bring us happiness, we are simply setting ourselves up for failure. As the writer of Proverbs says, in Proverbs 1:17-19b:

“The bird sees the trap being set and knows to stay away. But these people set an ambush for themselves, they are trying to get themselves killed. Such is the fate of all who are greedy for money. It robs them of life”.

Well, the Fifth Beatitude sits in stark contrast to the belief that getting more will be our answer to our search for happiness. Matthew Chapter 5:7, Jesus states:

“Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.”

Mercy is often been narrowly defined as forgiveness and forgiveness is always an act of mercy but mercy is not always an act of forgiveness. Mercy is giving what has not been earned or merited. And this broader definition is vital to understanding how mercy can be an alternative to greed. Greed is me getting what I think I deserve. Mercy is me giving you what you have not earned. Greed said happiness comes from desiring more but Jesus says happiness is found and given to others. In Acts 20:35b, Luke writes:

“Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

You are more happy when you give than when you receive. According to Jesus, you get more happiness from giving than you do from getting. Particularly, giving that is unexpected and unearned and unmerited. Especially giving not just out of excess or surplus, but giving that is sacrificial or might actually cost us something. And, most importantly, it is giving that is motivated by what we have already received. In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus tells a parable about three men. The first man owes a truckload of money to the second man and he can't pay it. He can't even pay a little bit of it. So he comes before the man and asks him for mercy and the second man erases the debt. He says “You know what, let's just cancel the whole thing” and lets him go. The first man goes to the third man and says “you owe me a couple bucks” and the third man says “I don't got it, I can't pay you.” So the first man beats him and throws him in jail and says “you will stay in jail until you can pay me every last penny of what you owe me.” When the second man heard what the first man had done, he called him back in, uncanceled the debt, and threw that man in jail as well. You see, the message of this story is very clear. We show mercy to others because of the mercy that God has already shown to us.

In Matthew 10:8b, Jesus says “Freely you have received, freely give.”

In Luke 12:48b, He says “From everyone who has given much, much will be demanded. From one who has been entrusted much, much more will be asked.”

We have been given great mercy by God and now we pass that mercy on to others. And remember that mercy extends far beyond forgiveness. James writes in James 1:17:

“Every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of Heavenly lights who does not change like shifting shadows.”

And that means all the good stuff you have...is mercy given to you and is mercy to be given to others.

And here's where my problem lies. You see, greed and mercy are not so much opposing forces as they are different ends of a spectrum, and the problem with a spectrum always is that grey area right in the middle. You see, we can easily identify the gratuitously greedy. I came across a story this week that's a perfect example. It says “There was a notorious miser who was called on by the Chairman of a community charity. The fundraiser said ‘Our records show that despite your great wealth, you have not given even once, to our charity drives.’ And the tightwad fumed. ‘Do your records show that I have an elderly mother who was left penniless when my father died? Do your records show that I have a disabled brother who is unable to work? Do your records show that I have a widowed sister who has small children and she can barely make ends meet.’ ‘No sir’ the embarrassed volunteer replied. ‘Our records don't show any of those things.’ The man said “Well, I don't give to any of them so why should I give to you?” We can spot the gratuitously greedy and we can also spot the magnificently merciful. Those people who give of themselves sacrificially in visible and unmistakable ways. You probably know some of them in your life. You've probably been benefited by some of them. Received mercy from some of them in your life. We think of great people like Mother Theresa who spent her life in the slums of Calcutta. We think of people who give great amounts to help cure disease or take care of orphans or to fight famine or all of these things. We have seen those people who are magnificently merciful. We see those people on the two ends of the spectrum but it's that area in the middle that causes me trouble.

Jeff Cook writes this about that middle ground. “Certainly we need tools and clothing and shelter to survive and certainly God's world is good and ought to be enjoyed. In purchasing a new home; typing on a new computer or sitting down to a well-prepared meal, many of us experience God given happiness. The world around us ought to be seen as a means to our bliss, but.....” But how do I justify buying a bigger house to store all of my stuff in when there are people living in cardboard boxes and sleeping on park benches. How do we splurge on a fancy meal in a restaurant when there are 25,000 people a day who die from hunger or hunger-related causes. How do I fork out 3, 4, 5 bucks a day for coffee from Starbucks or Tim's when 1.1 billion people do not have access to clean drinking water. How do I get a big screen T.V. or take a Disney vacation when 1.1 billion children live in poverty. I don't know. And I don't know how to draw that line. I don't know where in that grey area the line is supposed to be, but one of

the most helpful passages to me comes out of Mark, Chapter 12:41-44:

“Jesus sat down on the opposite side of the place where the offerings were being put and watched the crowd putting their money in the Temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling His disciples to Him, Jesus said “I tell you the truth this poor widow has put in more to the treasury than all the others. They gave out of their wealth, but she gave out of her poverty. She put in everything, all that she had to live on.”

You see, it's not based on dollar figures or percentages or statistics, it's all about what is in your heart. In the end, mercy places my trust in God to continue to provide for me as He's always done, while greed trusts in my ability to continue to acquire more. And perhaps, in this case, it's more important that we ask the question than come up with a one size fits all answer. Perhaps if we continue to ask “Where is my heart at and what is my trust in?” Perhaps if we continue to ask “Am I being led by my desire to acquire?” Perhaps if we continue to ask “Is receiving this for myself more important than giving that to someone else?” Perhaps if we continue to ask “Which hand am I holding all my quarters in?” Perhaps then, we'll be on the right track.

You stand on the front lines. The battle is on, one side says “Happiness comes from getting just a little bit more.” The other side says “Happiness comes from giving to others.” Which side will you choose?