

Is Greed Only an Attitude?

by David Servant

David Servant challenges the notion that greed is merely an attitude, emphasizing that our actions with possessions reveal the true state of our hearts.

Scripture: Matthew 5:20, Matthew 6:19, Luke 6:38, Luke 12:33, 2 Corinthians 9:8

Topics: "Stewardship", "Materialism"

Description

David Servant addresses the misconception among Christians that greed is solely an attitude of the heart and not reflected in outward actions, emphasizing that Jesus clearly stated our actions reveal what is in our hearts. He challenges the notion that God only looks at our hearts and not our bank accounts, pointing out that where we place our treasures, whether in heaven or on earth, reflects our hearts. Servant highlights the self-deception of claiming to hold possessions loosely while still clinging to them, stressing the importance of obeying Christ's command to sell possessions and give to charity as a true reflection of our hearts.

Transcript

"I'm glad God looks at the heart and not the bank account, otherwise, a lot of us Christians would be bound for hell." -- A recent comment on a Christian discussion board

That quotation represents a very commonly-held belief among professing Christians that greed is only an attitude of the heart that has nothing to do with one's outward actions. This belief is expressed in common sayings such as, "God is not opposed to our having possessions as long as our possessions don't have us" or, "The Lord doesn't mind what we own as long as He has our hearts." Thus we need not be concerned about how much we possess as long as we don't allow greed into our hearts.

Is this line of reasoning supported by Scripture? No, it actually stands in direct contradiction to what Jesus said. He commanded all of His followers:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:19-21, emphasis added).

Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:33-34, emphasis added).

Jesus could not have stated it more clearly. Where we put our treasures, either in heaven or on earth, reveals where our hearts are. Our actions reveal what is in our hearts. So it is simply not true that God looks only at our hearts and not at our bank accounts. Rather, when He looks at our bank accounts (and at everything else we possess) He knows what is in our hearts. We may fool ourselves, but we can't fool Him.

Simple and honest logic alone should be enough to convince us that our actions reveal our hearts. What would we think of the person who, as he stabs a knife into his victim's back, says, "I really don't hate this person. Inwardly I'm full of love." Or how about a person whose house is stacked to the ceiling with pornographic magazines and who says, "These magazines mean nothing to me. Inwardly I'm pure"? Or how about a drunk person who says with a slur, "Inwardly I'm sober"? Surely in every case we would consider these people to be sadly self-deceived. Their actions reveal their hearts while their words reveal their self-deception. Then why do we fool ourselves about our possessions and say, "All of these possessions mean nothing to me"? If they mean nothing, why have we given our lives for them? Why are we clinging to them? Why are we ignoring what Jesus said regarding them?

Greed is indeed an attitude of the heart, but one that is always expressed by outward actions. We all know and believe that. If you put three cookies on a plate before your three children, and Billy grabs all three, do you say, "Billy, go ahead and eat all three cookies...just don't allow greed into your heart"? No, Billy's actions reveal the greed in his heart. Greed is selfishness as it relates to material things. We all intuitively know that greed has something to do with obeying the second greatest commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In light of all this, consider the common Christian cliché, "It doesn't matter what you possess as long as you hold it loosely." That is, of course, doublespeak, a declaration that it is OK to be unwilling to give as long as you are willing to give. An unwilling willingness! The one who is holding something loosely is still holding it. His treasure is still on the earth. His actions reveal his heart.

"Holding one's possessions loosely" is akin to the idea of "mental relinquishment," something that in many peoples' minds fulfills Christ's commandments regarding dispossession. They have given all their possessions to Christ "in their hearts" while giving up nothing in reality. So all that they now own supposedly belongs to Jesus--even though it is just as much in their possession as it was before they "gave it all to Jesus." This is utter self-deception. It would be interesting to see what would happen if I used that method of relinquishment when paying my taxes. When the IRS comes knocking at my door, I'll just say, "I've mentally paid my taxes, and in my heart I've given you all that I owe you." I suspect that IRS would know that my actual failure to pay my taxes is a sure indication that in my heart I don't want to pay my taxes. God is no dummy either.

Another form of this same self-deception is found in the justification, "If the Lord told me to give away any of my possessions, I would do it in a second." Such a person imagines that his heart is right and that he is willing to relinquish anything that the Lord would require of him. Yet, as we just read from Luke 12:33-34, Jesus has commanded all of His disciples to sell their possessions, give to charity and lay up treasure in heaven. So this person who imagines he is so willing to give up his possessions proves that he is unwilling

by his ignoring Christ's clear commandment. It could be said that he is doubly-deceived, as he imagines that what Christ required of all of His disciples is not required of him, and he imagines if it ever was, he would surely obey.

One final form of the same self-deception is the alteration of Jesus' commandment from, "Do not lay up treasures on earth" to, "Do not treasure your earthly possessions." Once again, greed becomes only an attitude--the "treasuring" of our possessions--so we need not actually give up anything.

Jesus, however, did not say, "Do not treasure what you possess," calling us to adjust only our attitudes. He spoke of actually doing something with our possessions--selling them in order to lay them up in heaven rather than on earth. Moreover, adjusting only our attitudes about our possessions will not prevent thieves from stealing them or rust from consuming them. Only by giving up our possessions and laying them up in heaven do we prevent their inevitable demise.

So let us not be deceived. We must ask ourselves this question: "How have I obeyed Christ's commandment to sell my possessions and give to charity?" And certainly this initial relinquishment implies a continued stewardship that is characterized by less acquiring and more giving. Our obedience to Christ's commandment would be annulled by re-acquiring what we sold. So we must ask ourselves another question: "Now that I have sold what is not necessary and given the proceeds to charity, how have I been able to increase my giving to charity by acquiring fewer (if any) possessions?"

We may pride ourselves in paying our tithes, but we should not forget that the Pharisees scrupulously tithed...and then were cast into hell (Matt. 5:20; 23:15, 23, 33; Luke 18:12). They were tithers who loved money (Luke 16:14). If one has abundance, one may tithe and still lay up earthly treasures with the remaining 90%. One may tithe motivated even by greed if he listens to prosperity preachers who promise riches for those who contribute to their ministries.

"But," some may object, "did not Jesus say, 'Give, and it will be given to you...good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over'?"

Certainly Jesus said that, and it is true (see Luke 6:38). God entrusts sacrificial givers with more, however, not so they can disobey Him and lay up earthly treasures, but so they can give more and lay up additional treasures in heaven. This Paul declares three times in the space of two sentences about financial stewardship:

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed (1); as it is written,

He scattered abroad, He gave to the poor, His righteousness endures forever.

Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing (2) and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality (3) (2 Cor. 9:8-11).

Is your heart in heaven or on earth? The answer is found where your treasures are stored.

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