

“Court TV”

Luke 12:13-21

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Stone Mountain, Georgia
October 21, 2007

This television show premiered on September 16, 1996 and was an instant hit. It took over the top spot in the ratings for courtroom drama, a position it has never relinquished. It has been nominated ten times for a daytime Emmy. Originally it was going to be titled, “Hot Bench,” but was changed to “Judge Judy” to reflect the name of the leading character.

Judy Sheindlin had a reputation in New York for being one of the toughest family court judges in the country. She served on the bench for twenty-five years and was known as a no-nonsense jurist. She was featured in a LA Times article in 1993 that caught the attention of the producers of “60 Minutes.” They did a segment on Judge Judy that led to national recognition and her own television show, where people enter her courtroom to settle disputes.

In today’s text, Jesus refused to be a judge, regardless of how popular it may have made him. When approached by a man that wanted Jesus to settle a family dispute, he declined. “Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” Jesus asked. It was clear he wasn’t going down that road. I think I know why. It would have consumed him. Look how many courtroom television shows there are now, and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

It was, however, not uncommon for people to approach rabbis to help settle family disputes. Wealthy people probably used paid arbitrators, but the common folk turned to religious leaders. Perhaps this was why this man approached Jesus.

I am confident that Jesus did not say what this man wanted to hear. After refusing to get involved in this dispute, he said to the crowd, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” Luke 12:15.

Is there more than one kind of greed? I suppose there is. There is a greed that desires wealth, power and attention. There is a greed that wants everything in sight, covets what others have and wants more than anyone else. There is a greed that does not know what is worth wanting. Yes, I guess there is more than one kind of greed. Which causes you to struggle the most?

Why should we be on our guard against greed? I think it brings the worst out in us. The demons of fear, want, power and desire take over our lives and cause us to say some ugly things and make some terrible choices. They pit brothers, friends and business partners against each other. They widen the gap between the rich and the poor and the powerful and the weak. They reduce the value of life to the accumulation of possessions and the purpose of life to the relentless pursuit of them. They deceive us into thinking that being wealthy, powerful or famous satisfies our greatest yearnings and needs. They make us the center of our universe.

Don’t we see this in the parable Jesus told about the landowner blessed with a bumper crop? What was he going to do with this widely successful harvest? Apparently he had no trouble deciding to build bigger barns and using it all for his own pleasure.

I’m not surprised, especially when you listen to his self-talk. It is saturated with the personal pronouns I, me and mine. Barclay refers to them as “aggressive pronouns,” and Craddock says that they reveal that this man lived for himself, talked to himself, planned for himself, congratulated himself and trusted himself.

What was God’s response to this man’s astonishing lack of gratitude, humility and accountability? He called him a fool and said that very night he would be separated from all he thought would insure longevity and happiness.

That word, fool, is a harsh one, isn’t it? It means “mindless one.” Why did God consider this man a fool? After all, there is no indication that he was dishonest, corrupt and unjust or that he mistreated his workers. **Why was he a fool?**

He squandered an opportunity to do a lot of good. He could have used his abundance to heal painful wounds, meet strategic needs and make life better for those that were struggling. He could have been a wonderful role model that inspired others to share their resources and build a better community. He could have been his generation's Warren Buffett, Bill Gates or Bono. He missed this golden opportunity to be grateful and generous, never to come his way again.

He also left his family with the same problem facing the two brothers at the beginning of this text. His family would fight over his possessions after he was gone. What irony.

What is the point of the parable for us? Why did Jesus tell it and Luke insert it here? I believe both were holding up the high standard of sharing. The purpose of religion is to build community and it is accomplished by the actions of grateful and generous people.

Robbie Brown could have done anything he wanted with the \$20,000 he received as an outstanding senior at Emory's graduation last spring. Brown won the McMullan Award, given to the senior that exhibited outstanding citizenship, exceptional leadership and potential for service. He could have bought a newer car since he drives his dad's beat-up 1988 Volvo station wagon or used it to help pay for law school, which he entered this fall. He could have taken a trip around the world as a reward for four years of hard work. He did none of these things, however. Instead, he gave every penny of it to Elizabeth Sholtys, a fellow Emory student who, in her junior year of college, opened a home for street children in India.

In 2005, Elizabeth opened the Ashraya Initiative for Children, a home in the slums of Pune, India. At 23, Sholtys now has legal custody of nine children who live full time in the home. Ten more girls are involved in the home's outreach program.

"Right away, I knew I wanted to give this money to Liz," Brown said. "She needs it so much more than I do." I think I understand why Brown received this award.

What a contrast there is between the central character in Jesus' parable and this recent Emory graduate. The land owner Jesus referred to lived in a world of one, or in the words of the hero in the novel, Atlas Shrugged, "He worked for nothing but his own profit." How sad.

I think Jesus was afraid his followers would give in to selfishness, too. He knew how strong and devastating the pull of greedy gravity was. "Don't give in to it," he seemed to be saying. "The world has enough fools."