

*1 Kings 21:1-16 (NIV)*

Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. <sup>2</sup> Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth."

<sup>3</sup> But Naboth replied, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors."

<sup>4</sup> So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my ancestors." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.

<sup>5</sup> His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?"

<sup>6</sup> He answered her, "Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'"

<sup>7</sup> Jezebel his wife said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

<sup>8</sup> So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. <sup>9</sup> In those letters she wrote:

"Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people.

<sup>10</sup> But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them bring charges that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death."

<sup>11</sup> So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. <sup>12</sup> They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth in a prominent place among the people. <sup>13</sup> Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, "Naboth has cursed both God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death. <sup>14</sup> Then they sent word to Jezebel: "Naboth has been stoned to death."

<sup>15</sup> As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead." <sup>16</sup> When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard."

*Mark 10:17-31 (NIV)*

<sup>17</sup> As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

<sup>18</sup> "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

<sup>20</sup> "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

<sup>21</sup> Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

<sup>22</sup> At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

*Luke 12:32-34 (NIV)*

<sup>32</sup> "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

<sup>33</sup> Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

<sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also

*Do you want it all? Are you sure?*

I suppose we could use the word "greed" this week. But I prefer "avarice" because it is more to the point, coming from the Latin for "to crave." When what we crave in life is money or what it can buy, we are on the path to ruin. That's Ahab and Jezebel in the pointed story of 1 Kings 21. King Ahab sees Naboth's vineyard and wants the land for himself, not just

wants, but truly craves the plot for his own use. Kings were takers (1 Samuel 8), so this was an oft-told tale. It began simply enough. Ahab was in a foul mood. Sullen and withdrawn he had lain all day on a couch facing the wall of his palace. The servants cowered in the hallways of the grand winter home in Jezreel, afraid even to check on the king. As always, he was weak, unable to take any real action; but he was still king, with the power over life and death. The servants had good reason to stay out of sight.

When Jezebel swept into the room, dressed to the nines, she quickly saw that something was wrong. What had her poor-excuse-for-a-king husband gotten himself into this time, she wondered? She asked him. She asked a second time. And a third.

Finally, he rolled over and told her the story. He had gone to visit a neighbor who owned a vineyard that bordered the king's property. All Ahab had wanted was for the man, Naboth, to sell him the vineyard so Ahab could grow some vegetables in the plot. If Naboth didn't want cash, Ahab had said he'd swap some land with Naboth. The man wasn't going to lose even a penny and, yet, he had refused the king's offers. Flat out said no.

Now Ahab knew quite well that Naboth's refusal was within the law, and was not all that surprising. The Law of Moses had many provisions in it to ensure that land stayed within the family. It was a means of making sure the original division of land among the twelve tribes stayed reasonably intact. No Israelite would be surprised by Naboth's refusal to let this piece of land leave his family.

Ahab also knew that he had been at least a bit insulting to Naboth. Trade Naboth's vineyard so Ahab can grow a vegetable garden? A vineyard, a longtime symbol of God's people, given up so the idolatrous king could grow some lettuce? Really? Even as Ahab told the story to Jezebel, who was as fearsome as ever, he realized that the insult wasn't all that subtle. Perhaps if he had lied to Naboth about his intentions for the land, he might have gotten a yes. But Ahab doubted it. Naboth was a stubborn fool. Who refuses a king?!

Jezebel began to simmer as Ahab told the story. What kind of man had she married? She was the daughter of Tyre's king, a strong and resolute ruler, who exercised kingly prerogatives without restraint.

These YHWH worshippers had such strange notions. They refused to eat pork and shrimp, both of which she adored, as evidenced by her ample hips. The Israelites even thought that the king himself was subject to the Law of Moses, the Law of this god-king they called YHWH. What a joke! There was no higher authority than the king. Refuse the king's request and off with your head. That was Jezebel's theory of governing.

Knowing her husband's fecklessness, Jezebel sighed and told Ahab that she would take care of it. He'd get that land. She would come up with a plan that, on the surface at least, stayed within the bounds of this perverse Israelite Law. She patted the king on the head, reassured him that everything would be alright, and hurried out of the room.

And so she conspired against Naboth, arranging for his murder.

Ahab and Jezebel craved the land and all it represented. And they got it. Poor Naboth was consumed by their avarice. And years later, Ahab and Jezebel found themselves trapped in the vise of their own greed.

*Just sell it all*

So it was with the rich man who came to Jesus with a simple question. How could he obtain eternal life? Why does the man even ask the question? Perhaps he is sincere. Perhaps he is simply looking for an endorsement. Regardless, he gets the question wrong. One does not "do" anything to "inherit." Either the man wasn't paying attention or had stepped away when Jesus taught that we are to receive the kingdom like children (Mark 10:13-16, the verses immediately preceding this story). Like children? There is no place here for merit or achievement. The inheritance is a gift that cannot be earned.

Nonetheless, Jesus lets the man go ahead with his "doing" reminding the rich man that he knows the Law – no adultery, no murder, no theft, honor your parents, etc. The man believes that he has "done" all this. Surely, the man is feeling pretty good about himself at this point, eternal life is in his grasp! But then Jesus asks him to "do" one more thing: sell

his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus. Mark tells us only that the man “went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

What a change Jesus asks of this man. Sell all that he has! Surely Jesus can't mean what he says. What about the man's financial independence? His financial security? Jesus promises the man a large bank account in heaven, but what about his T-bills on earth?

Dismayed, the man crawled away. He could not do it. I suppose he craved what he had more than he craved the promise of eternity with God. I'd like to think my choice would be different, but I wonder if I'd try to rationalize my way right out of Jesus' demand.

Again . . . what do we truly crave?

*It really is a matter of the heart*

Aquinas set up *generosity* as the opposite of avarice. But he used the word *liberality* (freedom), for generosity flows from being free from attachment to money or what it can buy. Take a moment and consider all the stuff you have. Do you feel like it sets you free or does it seem more like burden? How much of it would you really miss if it disappeared tomorrow? Overcoming avarice and greed requires us to embrace generosity. But here's the tricky part. We aren't talking about what we do so much, as why we do it, for escaping avarice is a matter of the heart. Rebecca DeYoung writes:

This condition of the heart is the key to generosity. Generosity's measure is not how much is given away, in terms of the flat amount, but rather the way it is given: the manner of giving reveals the inner desires and attachments of the giver. In Luke's Gospel the widow gives away her last two copper coins out of devotion to the Lord, and Jesus commends her (Luke 21: 1– 4). Her coins couldn't buy a single church bulletin, but even in her poverty, her love and devotion made her willing to give. Likewise, the gospels recount the costly gift of a newly cut tomb for Jesus's body, given by a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27: 57– 60). The mark of generosity is not the size of the gift, or the wealth of the giver, but the readiness to give what one does have to God.<sup>1</sup>

Why is it so hard for us to turn away from greed, to surrender our attachment to money and what it buys. How do we really avoid the future that awaited the rich man who sadly walked away from Jesus? DeYoung summarizes the problem:

“The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” says the apostle Paul (1 Tim. 6: 10). Why is that? Because money is so attractive that we will commit many sins in order to acquire it? Or because money gives us the power to satisfy any sinful desire— and then get away with sin by buying influence or immunity? Even more, perhaps, loving money is the root of evil when having money itself becomes the goal. Aquinas argues that human beings are tempted to seek material wealth because it gives us the illusion of self-sufficiency— and therefore serves as a powerful incentive to deny our need for God. Who among us would want to give up the power to make ourselves comfortable and secure in this world? The possession of money represents this self-sufficiency and the power to secure it, and is a convenient and much less demanding replacement for God. As Frederick Buechner once put it,

The trouble with being rich is that since you can solve with your checkbook virtually all practical problems that bedevil ordinary people, you are left in your leisure with nothing but the great human problems to contend with: how to be happy, how to love and be loved, how to find meaning and purpose in your life. In desperation, the rich are continually tempted to believe that they can solve these problems too with their checkbooks, which is presumably what led Jesus to remark one day that for a rich man to get to Heaven is about as easy as for a Cadillac to get through a revolving door.

Greed is the root of all kinds of evil, because it is itself rooted in pride. This last explanation cuts deeper than we might first think. Having the means to provide for ourselves is much easier than trusting God to provide. Greed, like all the deadly sins, is

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<sup>1</sup> DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk (2009-06-01). *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (pp. 102-103). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

anchored in pride and nourished by it. Prideful greed is the desire to take over God's role and make sure we get enough for ourselves— or better yet, to make sure we get what we want. It is the desire to be able to provide fully for ourselves, and therefore not to have to depend on God. Aquinas explains avarice's link to pride by pointing out the way in which it counts as a spiritual vice. Although avarice is ostensibly about money and possessions (which would make it a carnal vice), he argues for a more fundamental dimension of disorder that makes it a spiritual vice beyond the mere love of money: "Avaricious people take pleasure in the consideration of themselves as the possessor of riches," where riches denotes "possessions of which we are the absolute masters."<sup>2</sup>

*Where to start? Try the tithe*

The tithe, the giving of a tenth of your income to God and his work in this world, is deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian going back to Abraham. The prophet Malachi brought this word from God: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing" (Malachi 3:10). But it is a mistake to read that oft-quoted verse as if God intends some sort of tit-for-tat bargain with his people. Pay the tithe and I'll reward you with lots of blessings. Send in your money and you'll get that promotion or new job. As Elizabeth Achtemeier writes,

That crude bargain is not what is involved here when Judah is admonished to "bring the full tithe" (v. 10). Motivating and accompanying all true gifts to God is the pouring out of our life, our love, our all. And when we so present ourselves, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, it is surely true that heaven's richest bounties are heaped upon us. . . . We find ourselves given graces anew every morning, too numerous to count—the glories of a good creation; joy in daily work; patience, kindness, self-control in the fellowship we have with one another; release from guilt and anxiety and dread of death; and above all, peace with God, who winds us round and round with mercy, as if with air. The Kingdom's goal—the glory of God—becomes our chief occupation, and we find all these other things added to us as well.

Overcoming avarice begins when we pour our life, our love, and, yes, our money upon God. I learned to tithe from my wife, Patti, and it has become one of those taken-for-granted parts of our marriage and our devotion to Christ – and essential part of our discipleship. My advice is to begin tithing now. Take the plunge. Let go. Not because you are looking for a return on investment, but out of gratitude to Him who loves you and gave his Son for you. May God's graces refresh and renew you every day of your life!

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How would you summarize in just a few words the vice of avarice? What has been your experience with avarice and greed? How has this vice manifested itself in your own life? In what ways do we risk letting avarice become a habit?
2. Do you really buy into the statement that our giving is a matter of the heart? How about our claim that giving is an essential part of growing in our faith? It is about far more than simply managing our church's finances and missions.
3. What do the words "steward" or "stewardship" mean to you? "Trustee" might be a better way to think of our responsibilities. What does "trustee" mean to you? Do you think that it is a more meaningful way to think about our role in managing God's assets?
4. Most of us have heard a lot about tithing. Do you tithe? If so, why? If not, why? What do you think about this whole business of tithing? Does it make you feel generous? Guilty?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Yes, I've relied on DeYoung a lot in this series, but her book is that good. I hope that you'll consider reading her book, *Glittering Vices*, for yourself. It isn't breezy reading, but is well worth the time.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Genesis 13:1-3</b> Abram and Lot choose their lands. Abram chooses the path of generosity.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Deuteronomy 8:11-18</b> Let us not become arrogant because of our success and riches. It is God who has blessed and it is God whom we serve.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Luke 12:16-21</b> A parable about greed</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Luke 21:1-4</b> A poor widow gives an enormous gift to God</p>
<p><b>Friday, 1 Timothy 6:6-10</b> Avoid the love of money!</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

