

Luke 12:15

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.

Analysis

And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. This verse introduces Jesus' warning against materialism and the parable of the rich fool (verses 16-21). The double imperative "Take heed, and beware" (horate kai phylassesthe, ὄρατε καὶ φυλάσσεσθε) emphasizes urgent vigilance. Horaō (ὄραω, "take heed") means to see, perceive, or watch carefully. Phylassō (φυλάσσω, "beware") means to guard, protect, or be on guard against. The repetition indicates serious danger requiring constant watchfulness.

The object of vigilance is "covetousness" (pleonexias, πλεονεξίας), from pleonexia (πλεονεξία) meaning greed, avarice, or literally "having more." It combines pleon (more) and echō (to have)—the insatiable desire to acquire and accumulate. This vice appears repeatedly in vice lists throughout the New Testament (Romans 1:29, Ephesians 5:3, Colossians 3:5, where Paul calls it idolatry). Covetousness is fundamentally idolatrous because it places ultimate trust and hope in possessions rather than God.

The explanatory clause, "for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (hoti ouk en tō perisseuein tini hē zōē autou estin ek tōn hyparchontōn autō, ὅτι οὐκ ἐν τῷ περισσεύειν τινὶ ἡ ζωή αὐτοῦ ἐστιν ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐτῷ), makes the profound philosophical and theological claim that life's essence and quality are independent of material abundance. The noun zōē

(ζωή) means life in its fullest sense—not merely biological existence but meaningful, flourishing, abundant life. The verb perisseuein (περισσεύειν, "abundance") means to exceed, overflow, or have surplus. Jesus declares that surplus possessions do not create or enhance true life.

Historical Context

This teaching occurred in response to a man requesting Jesus to arbitrate an inheritance dispute with his brother (Luke 12:13). Jesus refused to serve as civil judge but used the request as opportunity to address underlying spiritual issues—greed and misplaced priorities. First-century Jewish culture, like most agricultural societies, was concerned with inheritance and property. Land was primary wealth, and its division among heirs was crucial for family survival and status.

The economic context of Roman Palestine featured stark inequality. A small elite controlled most wealth and land, while the majority lived as peasant farmers, day laborers, or craftsmen with little economic security. In such contexts, inheritance disputes were intense and common, often tearing families apart. Jesus' refusal to arbitrate the dispute and His warning against covetousness challenged both the wealthy (who accumulated excessively) and the poor (who envied and coveted).

Jewish teaching condemned covetousness. The Tenth Commandment explicitly prohibits coveting a neighbor's possessions (Exodus 20:17). Proverbs repeatedly warns against greed and declares that "Better is little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble therewith" (Proverbs 15:16). However, first-century culture also viewed wealth as divine blessing and poverty as curse (based on Deuteronomy 28-30), creating theological tension. Jesus consistently challenged the equation of wealth with blessing, teaching that spiritual poverty can accompany material wealth (Revelation 3:17) and spiritual riches can accompany material poverty (James 2:5).

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. Why does Jesus emphasize vigilance ('take heed and beware') specifically regarding covetousness rather than other sins?
2. How does the equation of covetousness with idolatry (Colossians 3:5) illuminate this warning's seriousness?
3. In what ways does contemporary consumer culture make covetousness seem normal or even virtuous rather than sinful?
4. What is the difference between wise stewardship and prudent saving versus the covetous accumulation Jesus warns against?
5. How can believers cultivate contentment and resist covetousness while still working diligently and planning responsibly?

Interlinear Text

εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτοῦ Ὁρᾶτε καὶ φυλάσσεσθε
he said And unto the things which he Take heed and beware
G2036 G1161 G4314 G846 G3708 G2532 G5442

ἀπὸ τῆς πλεονεξίας ὅτι οὐκ ἐν τῷ περισσεύειν τινὶ¹
of G3588 covetousness for not in G3588 the abundance a man's
G575 G4124 G3754 G3756 G1722 G4052 G5100

ἡ ζωὴ αὐτοῦ ἐστιν ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων
life the things which he consisteth of G3588 posseseth
G3588 G2222 G846 G2076 G1537 G5224

αὐτοῦ
the things which he
G846

Additional Cross-References

Hebrews 13:5 (Parallel theme): Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

Proverbs 15:16 (Parallel theme): Better is little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble therewith.

Proverbs 16:16 (Parallel theme): How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!

Luke 16:14 (Parallel theme): And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him.

2 Timothy 3:2 (Parallel theme): For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy,

Colossians 3:5 (Parallel theme): Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry:

Psalms 62:10 (Parallel theme): Trust not in oppression, and become not vain in robbery: if riches increase, set not your heart upon them.

2 Peter 2:3 (Parallel theme): And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.

Luke 8:14 (Parallel theme): And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.

Psalms 37:16 (Parallel theme): A little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked.