

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventh Sunday after Trinity
August 4, 2019

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In our recent Sunday Mass gospels we have examples of a few *wrong prayers*. A wrong prayer is one that looks right but upon examination is not asking for a right thing. Martha of Bethany asked Our Lord to tell her sister to help in the kitchen. That is an example of a wrong prayer. So too James and John wanted the chief seats next to Jesus when He came into power. And in both cases the Lord put things right.

Today we hear about a man who expected the Lord to help him redistribute his father's inheritance. It was an absurd request! Jesus probably did not know the man or his brother, or the inheritance at stake, or why the man wanted more than he apparently had already received. But the incident prompted a memorable teaching to the crowd to "beware of all covetousness." In the parable that follows, Our Lord gave an example of at least *one kind* of covetousness.

When we think "Thou shalt not covet" what it often means is that we not desire to possess what belongs to our neighbor. But in the parable, the rich farmer is not covetous in this sense at all. He didn't want anybody else's property. He had more than enough of his own! But he had a bad attitude about it. The rich farmer is a symbol of all of us when we squander the divine image in which we were created, with all the potential and energy for good. How often we desire rather to focus on an earthly reward. We operate as if anything earthly could possess intrinsic and ultimately satisfying value. That happens even when time and again we are disappointed. Truth be told, we are slow learners!

Along with James and John, and Martha of Bethany, the rich farmer is an example of good gone wrong. The farmer had been a good steward of the gifts he had been given. A bumper crop is no accident! It is the result of good planning and good use of resources. Even the farmer's decision to pull down his barns and erect larger ones is commendable. It was a positive and appropriate response to the problem caused by the need to harvest his heavy crop.

The man's tragic weakness is that in all of this he was self-centered and not God-centered. He equated the great harvest with a selfish dream of being able to force an increased amount of food through the thirty feet of plumbing we call the human

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digestive system! Here is this man made in the image and likeness of Almighty God, whose destiny is to be higher than the angels, and whose abundance of things on earth should lead to a fuller life and the opportunity to extend charity. Yet all he thinks about is his own tummy! In a sense the rich farmer is the same kind of character as the prodigal son. The critical difference is that the prodigal son finally realized he was in a pigpen and did something about it. The rich farmer died in his pigpen!

There is a story of a little boy who reached into a jar for the last piece of candy. But he could not get his hand out of the jar without letting go of the candy. The candy represented the boy's goal in life. But this limited view of life trapped him, and he cried out that life is tragic and unfair. Then his mother came to the rescue and offered a better piece of candy. The child dropped the candy in the jar and his hand was freed.

Saint Paul, realizing all the evil of covetousness, twice identified it with *idolatry*. In doing this, Paul linked the Tenth Commandment with the First Commandment. He saw covetousness as putting material things in the place of God. And he saw that it traps us, just as if our hand were caught in a candy jar.

God Incarnate comes to us to confront our souls with their limited vision and goals and expectations as that of the little boy. Christ recalls us to our birthright, not with a better piece of candy, but with the reminder of who we are, where we have come from, and where (please God) we are going.

Remember it is not wrong to have precious earthly attachments. The problem never was with the bumper crop! But there is a tragic problem when our attachments divide us from eternal life. Unless we accept the call of Christ it is our lot never to be truly free.