

Lust and Greed: From Objectification to Gratitude and Generosity

1 Kings 21:1-16

On July 10, 1973, John Paul Getty III was kidnapped in the early morning hours near the Piazza Farnese in Rome. The kidnappers sent a ransom note to his family demanding \$17 million in return for his safe return.

They had good reason to believe such money would be paid. Their kidnap victim's grandfather was John Paul Getty, the oil tycoon who, at the time of the kidnapping, was one of the richest men in the world, with assets and trusts worth \$5 billion.

But John Paul Getty refused to pay the ransom, despite the pleas of the boy's parents. On October 21 a newspaper received an envelope with a lock of hair, a human ear, and a threat that the kidnappers would harm the boy further unless a ransom was paid. Still, the grandfather refused.

Finally, desperate for something, the kidnappers reduced the ransom to \$3.2 million, and John Paul Getty agreed to pay...to a point. He would pay the \$2.2 million that his accountants said was tax-deductible as a casualty loss. His son, the boy's father, would have to cover the rest, which he did by borrowing the money from his father at 4% interest.

John Paul Getty III was freed on December 15. According to John Pearson's book detailing the family's drama, his mother suggested that "it might be tactful" for the boy to call his grandfather and thank him. When he did, the older man refused to come to the phone. Later, in a better mood, he invited his grandson and the boy's mother to stay at his English estate, which they did, says Pearson, "for money is a great healer."

Of course, money was not a great healer for this family. One of John Paul Getty's sons died by suicide, another lost half his life to addiction. John Paul Getty III died at the age of 54 after living as a quadriplegic following an addiction-induced stroke. For the Getty dynasty, money was the cause of destruction and despair. The story of the kidnapping shows just how toxic the family's fortune was, with the life of the grandson determined to be worth, in the end, only as much as was tax deductible for the grandfather.

We get a kind of guilty pleasure from hearing stories like this. For those of us who don't have \$5 billion, we take a kind of savage delight in discovering how such money destroys people. It affirms, on the one hand, that money can't in fact buy happiness so we should be content with our lot, but it also lets us imagine that if we had that money, we wouldn't let it affect us in the same way. We wouldn't let money ruin our relationships or cause harm to other people. That's just a danger for the fabulously wealthy.

Like King Ahab. Not just a man with money, but a man with power. Ahab was king of Israel from about 874-853 BCE, and while he himself seems to be a rather ineffectual man, his wife most certainly was not. Jezebel was the daughter of King Ethbaal of Sidon, and she had definite ideas about what power and money ought to get a person.

So when Ahab throws himself a temper tantrum because he didn't get a vineyard he wanted, Jezebel rolls her eyes and gets to work. Ahab had tried to buy the vineyard from Naboth in order to turn it into a vegetable garden. Ahab probably had other vegetable gardens, but for whatever reason, he wanted one on this piece of land. So he makes Naboth a proposition to sell or exchange the vineyard.

Only Naboth can't sell the vineyard. When the Israelites entered the promised land, God gave plots of land to each clan and family, and they were to keep that land in their family forever. The laws of Jubilee stated that every 50 years, any land that had been leased out was to be returned to the original owner. Embedded in Israelite law is both a sense of land as a sacred trust – owned by God and given to his people to tend and care for – and a desire to ensure every Israelite has a place to call home and a source of income.

Ahab, as king of Israel, should know this. And maybe he does, but it doesn't matter. He wants the vineyard, so he asks Naboth to sell it to him. When Naboth refuses, Ahab throws a hissy fit. Throws himself onto his bed and sulks. It's all rather pathetic.

Which is exactly what Jezebel thinks. "Are you a king," she demands, "or a bowl of cheerios?"

Jezebel charts out their course of action. She orchestrates a religious ceremony with Naboth seated where everyone can see him. Opposite him she puts two men who will do anything for a nickel and has them accuse Naboth of cursing both God and the king, a crime punishable by death. Sure enough, an uproar ensues, and Naboth is taken outside the city and stoned to death.

We don't know if Jezebel tells Ahab what she did, or if she simply tells Ahab that Naboth had conveniently died of natural causes. But with Naboth out of the way, a triumphant Ahab takes possession of the vineyard where he can plant tomatoes to his heart's content.

This story shows us two ways in which greed plays itself out. First, we see the difference in how Ahab and Naboth relate to the land. For Naboth, land is a sacred trust. It's a gift from God, to be stewarded and

honored. For Ahab, land is a commodity. The person who owns land can do with it what they want – the land exists for people, not people for the land.

Second, greed causes Ahab and Jezebel to treat Naboth as disposable. He stops being a subject whom Ahab is meant to be caring for and protecting, and instead becomes an object, something in the way of what he wants. The only way to get what he wants is therefore to get rid of the thing standing in his way.

Now again, I think we read a story like this and think to ourselves, “I would never let money corrupt me like that. I would never treat other people as though they were disposable. I would never need something so badly that I’d kill someone over it.”

And maybe we wouldn’t. Hopefully we wouldn’t. I’d like to believe that greed wouldn’t lead us to make such a stark, terrible decision.

But I think the problem we face is that greed is so baked into our society that we contribute to the objectification and harm of other people without even realizing it.

We live in a culture built on greed. In order for the economy to grow, we need to buy more, which means we have to be told that we need more, that we never have enough. Everywhere we look people are trying to sell us things, and more often than not, they succeed.

And they aren’t just selling us things, but selling us a way of life, a life that prizes autonomy and convenience. Both *how* we spend our money and *what* we spend our money on indicate that we are living in an increasingly individualistic society, where we can be free of any

entanglements, any responsibility, any need of other people. We want *things* without having to give anything of ourselves in return.

I'm as guilty of this as the next person. I'll self-scan so I don't have to make small talk with the cashier. I'll google something instead of asking a Lowe's employee for help. I'll pay more to have food delivered through doordash so I don't have to give my order to a real person.

Andy Crouch says that the power of money is that it allows us to get things done, often by means of other persons, without the entanglements of friendship. In other words, people become...objects. They become means to an end, rather than people with whom we have genuine connections. And look, maybe you don't consider talking to a Lowe's employee as building a genuine connection. But I think all of this is changing how we relate to people, *including* our friends. Elizabeth Oldfield looks back fondly on her college years where every few months her friends would be helping someone move, building memories through the grind. Now they all have the money to pay movers...and there's something lost when you no longer need to ask your community for help.

So our spending habits, geared as they are towards autonomy and convenience, are changing our relationships with people, friends and employees alike. Our desire to acquire things quickly and easily have moved us away from interacting with people as...people.

More troublingly, our desire to acquire things cheaply means we're participating in systems of harm and injustice. Shein is the world's most popular fashion brand and clothing producer. Based out of China, the business sells low-priced clothing across the world, marketed by social media influencers who show off their Shein hauls on TikTok and

Instagram. The company is wildly successful. The company *is also* built off the backs of labourers who work in terrible conditions.

Investigations have discovered that some employees work 75-hour shifts with little time off. They're working out of informal factories set up in residential buildings, labouring in rooms with no windows or emergency exits. There are no contracts or minimum wage requirements. In one factory, employees were working 17-hour days for a base salary of \$20 a day, which would be docked by \$14 if any garments had mistakes.

In our global culture of fast fashion, it's easy to not consider the employee halfway around the world who makes the clothing we wear. To buy sustainably and ethically usually means spending more money on fewer items...and we are trained to want more, and more, and more. So, in our quest for more, people become objects, unnamed and faceless, who we try not to consider as we seek to sate our desires.

Now, in case you're not feeling bad enough already, let's throw lust into the mix. I've combined lust and greed because they both do essentially the same thing – they cause us to treat people as objects, not subjects. Lust is different from sexual desire. Attraction and desire are good things when they're part of a vulnerable, mutual relationship. Lust, on the other hand, involves reducing a person to an object, a tool that can be used for another person's sexual gratification.

Love – and a sexuality that is shaped by love – is about mutual self-giving. It involves sacrifice and vulnerability and care and dignity. Lust is the opposite. Lust demands, lust is self-centered, and it strips someone of their personhood. Like greed, lust plays into this idea of autonomy and convenience. With just a click of a button, we can satisfy our desires

without having to give anything of ourselves in relationship with another person. Through pornography, we use the bodies of people we don't know to make ourselves feel good.

And because porn triggers a release of dopamine, the neurotransmitter that makes us feel pleasure, the regular consumption of porn causes our brain to become desensitized to the regular amount of dopamine released during regular sexual activity, which means we won't receive the same pleasure or satisfaction from our partner. And so the very thing that should increase our sense of intimacy and vulnerability with the person we love becomes a roadblock in our relationship. What's lost, all the way around, is relationship.

And relationship is, ultimately, what we crave. Frederick Buechner said that "lust is the craving for salt by a man dying of thirst." I think we can apply this to greed, too. We long for connection, we long to be known, we long to live in relationship with God and each other. But we settle for less than that – we try to fill that longing with stuff and pleasure, everything we can achieve without risking any pain or discomfort – because that's what relationship demands of us. But the desire is never sated. The salt cannot quench our thirst.

So how do we quench the thirst? How do we orient ourselves back towards relationship, and develop new habits that affirm people's selfhood and dignity?

Well, we can start by practicing gratitude and generosity.

"Gratitude," says Oldfield, "is unavoidably relational, implying we have received help, or a gift. It acknowledges need and need equals vulnerability."

Gratitude can be practiced in a couple of ways. We can be grateful on our own, keeping a gratitude journal or going through a list of things we're grateful for at the end of the day. Practicing gratitude reminds us that we actually have enough, that we don't need more and more and more...gratitude is an avenue to contentment.

But what's maybe more compelling in this case is extending gratitude to other people. I wonder what it would look like if, as a Lenten discipline, we tried, for one week, to only buy things if we could say "thank you" to a real person as part of that exchange. If we inconvenienced ourselves so we actually had to relate to the people around us. And if we then didn't purchase anything where we couldn't trace it back to a real person to whom we could say, "thank you." How might that practice make us both aware of our spending habits, and start to orient us back into relationship, away from the idea of the autonomous self?

And we can practice generosity, which is the flip side of gratitude. Being generous with our time or our energy or our things keeps us from calcifying, it chips away at the armor we use to protect ourselves from any vulnerabilities. Generosity means we walk around, not with clenched fists, but open hands, ready to be in relationship with other people.

Gratitude and generosity help keep people in front of us as people – subjects - not objects. People to relate to, not to use. When we think about our money, our resources, and our sexuality, in terms of what will draw us into actual relationship with other people, we'll find ourselves more fulfilled and satisfied than any business could possibly promise us.

One commentator I read this week wondered what would have happened had Ahab practiced gratitude and generosity. What might

have been had Ahab looked at Naboth as a person with dignity and worth who could have helped Ahab, rather than as an object in his way? If Ahab had simply asked Naboth to grow some vegetables for him in his vineyard. Would they have bonded over a shared love of tomatoes? Would they have gotten to know each other? Would Naboth have been able to share some wisdom with Ahab as they chatted over the garden wall? Would they have formed a mutually life-giving relationship?

We'll never know. Ahab let greed get the better of him. But that's the question for each of us. What life is possible if we live with generosity and gratitude? What flourishing might we find?

Would you pray with me?

God, help us to live in gratitude and generosity.

Remind us that there is so much more life to be had in relationship with you and each other, rather than in relationship with things.

Turn us outward, open us up from our caved-in selves, that we might be able to give and receive with humility and graciousness.

And help us to treat one another – our neighbour across the street and the person a world away – with dignity, relating to one another, not as objects to serve a purpose, but as fellow image bearers you have called us to love.

We pray this in Jesus' name,
Amen.