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Meditations on Greed, Compulsion and Worry

Applying the Teachings of Christ to Alter Destructive Life Patterns

by Edward "Chip" Anderson

VII

Then Jesus said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'"

"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

Luke 12:15-21

This parable has been titled the Parable of the Rich Fool. The main idea contained in it is found as Jesus introduces the story: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed."

Here Jesus looks at the psychology of greed and points out how foolish it is to want, desire, lust for, and spend one's energy trying to accumulate more than is needed. Some people accumulate much more than they need; perhaps they even accumulate more money than they could possibly spend in the remaining years of their life. While few of us can readily identify with such a wealthy individual, we would likely agree that such a person is foolish, particularly if he or she has spent great energy and neglected other people and things to accumulate possessions. But why would we think that this person is foolish? Probably because the strain this person went through shortened his or her life and was a distraction from people and things which were more important.

So then why are people so foolishly greedy? Why do people seek and spend great energy trying to obtain more than they need? I believe it is because they are trying to make up for some aspect of their lives in which they feel inferior.

When we feel inferior, we look for something to arrest our feelings of insecurity. But if the thing about which we feel inferior is not addressed, confronted, and accepted, our greed, our attempt to compensate, simply makes us slaves to our feelings of insecurity.

Foolish? Yes, because that which compensates for insecurities can never make up for that over which we feel inferior!

VIII

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will

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wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds. Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?"

Luke 12:22-26

Feelings of inferiority trigger feelings of insecurity and out of insecurity comes great energy to try and compensate for that over which we feel insecure. But, since that which we are greedy to gain can never compensate for the inferiorities which started the strivings in the first place, we worry—which just starts the cycle all over again.

Someone has commented that there is something called "poor people's paranoia": the fear that what little they have will be taken away. Maybe there is a parallel to that fear among those who are more wealthy: "compensation compulsions": compulsions to compensate for areas of perceived inferiority.

A compulsion is a driving desire to do something or get something done. Compulsions are based upon fear and are perpetuated by worry. Our compulsions drive us to achieve, accomplish, and gain—in hope that these achievements will compensate for that which makes us feel insecure. But such compulsions never directly address the real problem—our feelings of inferiority.

The compensation compulsion will never be broken until a person addresses, confronts and accepts these feelings. But how does one do that?

A first step is to realize how the cycle began. Feeling inferior starts with negative judgments about ourselves. These negative judgments may be about our body, mind, personality, sensuality, background, race, appearance, etc. Usually, some early experience when we were rejected or judged as unworthy starts the process. Then we perpetuate it by our own judgments and evaluations. Because we have judged that aspect of ourselves to be so insufficient, ugly and repulsive, we try to cover it up, our hope being that if we do enough, accomplish enough, or have enough, that which is inferior about us will not be noticed.

IX

"Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!"

Luke 12:27-28

I have been describing a cycle that results in expending considerable energy and yet fails to relieve the tension that drives the cycle. I have termed this pattern the compensation compulsion. The stages in the cycle of compensation compulsion include: 1) negative self judgments, 2) which generate feelings of inferiority, 3) which results in insecurity, 4) which gives rise to compensation strivings, 5) resulting in greedy efforts to achieve, and 6) worry about succeeding which fuels more insecurity and compensation strivings.

Clearly many individuals accomplish many things as a result of their

compensation compulsions. They may amass considerable wealth, achieve highly in school, become powerful, become well known, develop physical beauty or strength, or become famous through effort fueled by their compensation compulsions. On the other hand, many people who have compensation compulsions are not successful. For them, life is a desperate experience; they are driven to achieve but are never successful. Thus, their compensation compulsion cycle becomes more and more desperate. And, if they do not succeed, they eventually give up on life and quit living, one way or another.

Even if a person is successful and accomplishes many things through their compensation compulsion, one must ask: What's the cost: Time? Energy? Peace of mind? One of the first things to go when we are caught up in compensation compulsions are our love relationships.

Compensation compulsions interfere with love relationships in two ways. First, they consume considerable time and effort needed to maintain love relationships. Second, spouses will hide from their partners the insecurities and inferiorities for which they are compulsively trying to compensate. And since that which is hidden cannot be loved, the love relationship is lessened.

There is an alternative to this sad situation: stop hiding and stop covering up. Expose the areas where you feel inferior; expose these areas to God in prayer and expose these areas of perceived inferiority to your mate. Try this and experience acceptance. . . . Sounds hard to do? Real life, down to earth faith is hard work. It is a step of faith to expose yourself and believe that it will work out better if you do.

X

"And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."

Luke 12:29-31

I have written about greed and compulsions in terms of accumulating things beyond what one actually needs. Most people would agree that being compulsive or worrying about "excessive" matters is self-defeating. However, in this Scripture passage, Jesus speaks about more basic life-sustaining matters. Here he warns us not to worry about even life-sustaining elements as food and drink.

The point of this Scripture seems to be that anything can become a source of security and comfort—even food and beverages. The problem with food, beverages, money, people, jobs, positions, or any other person or thing becoming a source of security is that it can be taken away from us! Thus, they provide only temporary security. And since these sources of security can be taken away, we worry.

Christ does not want us to waste our time and energy worrying foolishly. In his love, he does not want to see us hurt or cheat ourselves through pointless worry which robs us of the "life," the aliveness, which he came to give us.

So what does Jesus want us to do, pretend we do not feel insecure? Does he want us to pretend that we do not worry? No. He wants us to gain our needed security from someone who will not and cannot be taken away.

Who is that someone who will not be taken from us? Who is that someone who cannot be taken away from us? And, who then is the only one on whom we can "set our hearts" to find security and reduce worry?

Important relationships with spouses, children, and other family members are often posed as sources of security. But since they could be taken away, we worry about them and worry about what we would do if we lost them. So even preciously important relationships will not suffice to bring us security. Likewise careers, possessions, political agendas and even church activities are not sufficient for solving security needs.

Thus Jesus' directive, spoken in love so that we can have a more secure and worry-free life, is: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God."

XI

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to

be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:38-42

It is interesting to me that I tend to worry about things that are either beyond my control or that seem to be slipping into disarray. I find this interesting because my worrying reflects my attempts to be a responsible person, to be a good person. But oddly enough, worrying often defeats my attempts to see that good and responsible person, for I exhaust myself in worry.

Martha, the worrier, was not a bad person. She was trying to be good and responsible. She wanted to prepare and make a nice meal for Jesus. And yet Jesus did not recognize her attempts to be good. Instead, he complimented Mary because she chose a better action. But how could anything be better than being responsible?

Jesus' statement to Martha that "only one thing is needed" seems so simple, almost naive. In my life, it seems that I am often like a juggler trying to keep the balls from falling. It seems to me that there is never just one needed thing; so often everything seems to be needful and important. And I cannot seem to respond to all the important things that need to be done. Thus, I worry . . . the balls are dropping, and everything seems to be falling apart.

But in an effort to be open to this Scripture, I re-read it and noticed what Mary did that Jesus identified as "better" than all of Martha's attempts to be responsible. Mary simply "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said!" Could it be that the one thing that I really need to do is to sit and listen to the Lord?

XII

Then they asked Jesus, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

John 6:29

I have written about the detrimental effects of greed, compensation compulsions, and worrying on our lives. I have also pointed to Christ's teachings as an antidote to these life-destructive patterns. But the challenge is to apply the teachings of Christ so that they make a difference in our lives.

I have always been intrigued by magic. I enjoy seeing an expert magician exercise his craft. Personally, I would like to be a magician in my work as a counselor and therapist. I long to say the right thing, to "turn the trick," to make profound observations which will magically solve problems and make everything right. And yet, it is my experience that each step of personal progress and each helping act has been based on work, not magic.

To break compensation compulsions, to break worrying patterns, to break greedy strivings, or to break any other self-defeating pattern takes work—there is no magic!

Jesus is well aware that it takes a lot of work to have the "life more abundant" which he came to give. But the work and effort he teaches us to engage in is significantly different and in many ways more difficult than what we are used to.

The type of work Jesus teaches us to engage in is that of belief and faith. For me, it would have been easier if Jesus would have said he wanted me to build something. But he said believe and have faith. I do not trust, have faith, or believe anything or anyone easily. For me faith is work.

Even believing the beautiful message of John 3:16—that God loves me—takes work. I have to remind myself, take leaps of faith, and work at it.

I want magic, but Jesus affirms that work is required. That work involves and requires me to make a choice. "The work of God," Jesus said, "is to believe in the one whom he has sent." And that has profound ramifications—believing that Jesus was the Son of God, believing his teachings, believing in him for salvation and forgiveness, believing that I am to be a lover, and believing that I am loved for who and what I am, rather than for who and what I might become. In each instance, believing is a choice.