

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“[T]ell my brother to divide the inheritance with me,” a man said to Jesus. What is going on here? Moses talks about inheritance. There were rules governing inheritance, like we have in our laws. Your will governs your estate, but for us, there is more flexibility. A testator in Israel had to follow certain rules. For example, the inheritance was given to sons, and the inheritance had to be divided into equal portions, except that the firstborn was to receive a double-portion (Deut. 21:15-17). It was the law.

So what is going on here? It seems as if this man was not satisfied with his portion. He wanted more. Jesus, who sees into the heart, rebuked him: *“Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?”* But then he turned to the crowd and warned them all: *“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*

Covetousness is a particularly difficult sin to avoid, and its consequences are dire. You recall the account of the rich young man. He wanted eternal life, but was unwilling to forego his possessions to follow Jesus. His earthly riches were more important to him than the heavenly treasure of eternal life. Jesus went on to teach His disciples: *“[O]nly with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 19:23).

Riches and earthly possessions are so alluring to us that God gave us two words in the commandments warning us against coveting. You know them: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.” And “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” Luther explains the Ninth Commandment this way: “We should fear and love God so that we do not scheme to get our neighbor’s inheritance or house, or get it in a way which only appears right, but help and be of service to him in keeping it” (Small Catechism).

In our monthly Confessions study, we’re studying Luther’s Large Catechism, and a week ago Thursday, we considered the Lord’s Prayer 6th petition: “And lead us not into temptation.” You remember how Luther explains this petition, too: “God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice” (Small Catechism).

This question was asked: “Is capitalism sinful?” “Can capitalism be reconciled with Christian ideals?” You know capitalism is the private ownership of the means of production, and markets drive production and income. It’s mostly what we have

in the United States — with regulations meant to curb capitalism’s excesses, and it has been exceedingly successful.

Capitalism has a drive for profit — Christians can support that, I think. A business serves his customers with a product or service; customers pay for it; the business earns a profit and uses the profit to improve the product, hire workers, pay taxes, etc. But capitalism has its problems, as any economic system does. That drive for profit can sometimes turn into greed and exploitation — covetousness, and these excesses Christians do not support. We call them what they are ... sin.

St. James issues his warning against the rich who exploit their laborers: *“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ... You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts”* (James 5:1, 3-4). James highlights the rich person’s self-interest at the expense of those who work for him. Franz Pieper quotes this passage when he talks about sins that cry out to heaven.

Jesus is talking about the same self-centered, selfish accumulation of wealth in the parable that He told the crowd. That man was considering only himself as his fertile fields yielded *“plentifully.”* *“How can I have enough to live comfortably?”* *“[R]elax, eat, drink, be merry.”* But that focus on self to the exclusion of others — more importantly, to the exclusion of God — did him no good. He died and had to leave his possessions to who knows whom.

Wise Solomon, too, is thinking about the one who will inherit the fruits of his labor, and he laments: *“sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it,”* and he calls it *“vanity and a great evil.”* Not that toil itself has no worth. No, Solomon teaches: *“There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil,”* recognizing that this *“is from the hand of God.”* When we pray, *“Give us this day our daily bread,”* we, too, realize that our earthly blessings come from God, and we are led *“to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving”* (Small Catechism, 4th Petition).

So the problem is not in the money or possessions themselves. They are gifts from God. The problem is the inordinate, sinful desire for them that focuses on self and not on God, not on others. And that is not the way of Christians, who *“have been buried with [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead”* (Col. 2:12).

That’s the context of St. Paul’s message to us in the Epistle. We’re Christians; we’re baptized; we *“have been raised with Christ.”* We are *“rich toward God”* as we

look to Christ and believe in His sacrifice for our salvation, for He has made us His children, and so we have been made heirs of God, St. Paul says (Rom. 8:17), not heirs according to the law, but *“heirs according to promise”* (Gal. 3:28). The writer to the Hebrews also speaks of our *“eternal inheritance”* as a promise. It doesn’t come by the *“first covenant,”* the law, but by the Gospel, by Him whose death has redeemed us *“from the transgressions committed under the first covenant”* (Heb. 9:15). Thus, through baptism and faith we are raised with Christ who rose from the dead, and Peter will say, therefore we have *“an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time”* (1 Pet. 1:4-5).

Until that day when you will claim your promised inheritance, *“[s]et your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,”* as St. Paul says. Baptized into Christ, you are a new creation; you’re wearing a new self, clothed with Christ’s own holiness; you have been *“renewed in knowledge after the image of [your] creator.”* Therefore, return to your baptism daily, by “contrition and repentance” *“[putting] to death ... what is earthly in you,”* including *“covetousness, which is idolatry.”* And daily let the “new man ... emerge and arise,” *“[seeking] the things that are above”* — they are the true riches of God — that you might “live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (Small Catechism, Baptism, Fourth Part).

Brothers and sisters, our hope is not in this life only; and it’s not in earthly possessions. Our hope is in the Lord Jesus, in Him who died, who was raised to life on the third day, who is the first fruits for all of us who fall asleep in Him (1 Cor. 15:20). Our inheritance is found in Jesus. Abiding in Him, in His Word and Sacraments, we are laying up for ourselves an eternal treasure in heaven. God grant this to us ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.