

“The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss: The Lorax”

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1 Chronicles 29:10-13

Then David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly; David said: “Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.

Matthew 19:13-24

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

I was twelve years old when I first saw *The Lorax* on TV. When I heard of this creature who spoke “with a voice that was sharpish and bossy” I felt the Once-ler was talking about me, and when the Lorax said, “I speak for the trees for the trees have no tongues,” I knew my life’s purpose.

Last week I mentioned that Theodor Seuss Geisel once said, “Kids can see a moral coming a mile off.” Still, he said, “there’s an inherent moral in any story.” *The Lorax* is no exception.

We listen as the Once-ler tells his young listener of when he first came to this glorious place,

“Way back in the days when the grass was still green
and the pond was still wet and the clouds were still clean,
and the song of the Swomee-Swans rang out in space...”

But it was the trees that got his attention. All his life he’d “been searching for trees such as these.” As he says,

In no time at all, I had built a small shop.
Then I chopped down a Truffula Tree with one chop.
And with great skillful skill and with great speedy speed,

I took the soft tuft. And I knitted a Thneed!
The instant I'd finished I heard a ga-Zump!
I looked. I saw something pop out of the stump
of the tree I'd chopped down. It was sort of a man...
he was very upset as he shouted and puffed—
“What's that *THING* you've made out of my *Truffula tuft*?”
“Look, Lorax,” I said. “There's no cause for alarm.
I chopped just one tree. I am doing no harm.
I'm being quite useful. This thing is a Thneed.
A Thneed's a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!”

Soon, the the Swamee-Swans, the Brown Bar-ba-loots and the Humming-Fish are gone. The Once-ler says, “I meant no harm. I most truly did not. But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.”

The Lorax is about environmental degradation. I've actually preached it that way. But today we're going in another direction. Because before the pollution, this story is about greed. As I read it again, two words jumped out at me. You heard one a moment ago. When confronted, the Once-ler says, “I'm being quite *useful*.”

Can you think of a time when being useful has kept you doing something past the point of its being good or healthy or safe. A simple example is doing yardwork and coming in with a sunburn. Denn writes of being a 4th-generation fisherman. He says if it was up to the fishermen, they'd keep catching until they caught everything. As long as one fish was uncaught and everyone was afraid someone else might catch it, the fish wouldn't be safe.¹

Quotas are needed. But what about the rights of the fishermen? *Rights* is that second work I noticed. As people do when their sense of privilege has been challenged, the Once-ler gets angry. He has destroyed what drew him to this place, yet when the Lorax confronts him, he gets mad.

“Well, I have my rights, sir, and I'm telling you
I intend to go on doing just what I do!”

The Once-ler does not cut down the trees for no reason. He does it because he wants to keep on “biggering and biggering.” Similarly, people haven't made a mess of the world for no reason but because it's the easiest and cheapest way to produce all the stuff we want. We don't object, at least not loudly, because safer, cleaner ways cost more. And when confronted we cry loudly about our rights.

Cambridge Dictionary defines greed as “a very strong wish to continuously get more of something.” Erich Fromm once wrote, “Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction.”

Jesus cautions us to be on guard against all kinds of greed (Luke 12:15). He tells us, “It will be very hard for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. In fact, it's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter.”

We're mistaken when we think only rich people are greedy. Research tells us that once we reach a certain standard of living – which is lower than you think – more money or stuff will not make us happier. It can even do the opposite.

Of course, money's not the problem. It's the love of money. And the love of what it buys. Remember John Wesley words? "Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can."

During my 25-year marriage, we moved on average every 2-2½ years. When you have to pack and unpack everything you own, repeatedly, you notice how much stuff you really have. What if we substitute *stuff* for *money* in that verse from 1 Timothy, "The love of stuff is at the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving stuff, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows."

We need to be careful about what motivates us. One of Theodore Roosevelt's sons once said, "Father always had to be the center of attention, when he went to a wedding he wanted to be the bride. When he went to a funeral, he was sorry he couldn't be the corpse." There are different kinds of greed. One is self-centeredness.

We're all just interested in doing the best we can for ourselves and our loved ones, yet... Do you remember some years ago, a mother, whose daughter was trying out for the high school cheerleading team, killed another girl's mother so the girl would be distracted and fail?

Folks think they have the right to scream at the referee. At a Woodchucks game, some folks behind me got quite incensed when the umpire called an out at first base.

Should we be more aware of our words when there's an accident and we say, "Thank God" when it isn't a loved one? It's still somebody's neighbor, someone's child.

It may surprise you, that we can also be spiritually greedy. Thornton Wilder once wrote: "Money is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around encouraging young things to grow."

This is true, but not just about money. We can be stingy with our time, our attention or even our spiritual knowledge or faith. Maybe you know someone who listens to all sorts of church-y podcasts and reads all the latest Christian books. Yet they have no interest in sharing their passion or their learnings. Sometimes they feel, and act, like they're spiritually superior to everyone else.

You've heard me say it so many times but all that we have – all the money, yes, but also, all the stuff, all the knowledge and faith, all the time that we hoard for our own use – it all comes from God. It belongs to God. The Biblical language about God giving it to us is unfortunate because it leads us to think that it's ours to do with as we choose... when really it's for us to use as God chooses.

Where are you in this? Do you get caught up in feeling good about your own *usefulness*... and your *right* to do what you feel is best with all that is – not really – yours? What are your priorities? Because priorities are the only things that will keep greed at bay. The Once-ler's priority was biggerring his money. To do this he cut down every Truffula tree.

We are here – in this time and place – to make a difference in the lives and the world around us. This only happens when we commit ourselves to following as God leads us. The Bible tells us that we are to make God our priority. We do this by living God's way for us – by practicing justice and compassion, by working to grow in our discipleship, individually and with others. Leaving out any part of this cripples your spiritual growth. If you don't do for others, individually and systemically, if you neglect your own or others' spiritual growth, you're like a noisy cymbal or clanging drum.

Yes, this requires commitment and work. But it's God calls for you. What one thing can you do, today, or this month, to curb your greed, however it presents itself? Ask God for the courage to step into this new truth and trust that God will accompany you. Your life will be the richer for it.

Amen.

¹ Denn Guptill, "The Lorax," Mar 4, 2012 sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-lorax-denn-guptill-sermon-on-creation-165091