

When Your Gain is Someone Else's Loss

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Luke 12:15

And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Questions:

1. Have you ever had to stand up against bad practices or greed in your job or had to face a corrupt system? What was the consequence?
2. In the world of modern business, what does it mean to be a good steward? How can a person take risks, make good investments, and be trustworthy with the resources under his or her care?
3. Where do you see greed most prevalent in society? In the church?
4. Where do you have to guard most against greed in your life?

In the News

Opioid Crisis Kills Hundreds of Thousands and Raises Questions of Accountability

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) tracks the movement of every prescription pill in the United States, from factory to pharmacy, including the class of powerful painkillers called opioids. Recently released information reveals that America's opioid epidemic has been fueled by failures at every level of the drug industry, from pill manufacturers to wholesalers to retailers.

According to *The Washington Post*, this information "shows a trend in pill distribution that, according to plaintiffs suing the drug industry, can't be passed off as reasonable therapeutic medical treatment." In recent years, the drug industry has made money by selling billions of painkillers to people in vulnerable communities, even after it became clear that these pills were fueling addiction and overdoses. To make matters worse, the medical community and government agencies failed to intervene in effective ways.

"This really shows a relationship between the manufacturers and the distributors," said Jim Geldhof, a retired DEA employee who spent 43 years working on drug diversion cases. "They were all in it together." Geldhof, who is now a consultant for plaintiffs in a huge lawsuit against the drug industry,

added, "We're seeing a lot of internal stuff that basically confirms what we already knew ... it was all about greed, and all about money."

The drug industry has denied such allegations, blaming doctors who prescribed opioids in dangerous ways. The industry has also contended that the DEA could have stopped the diversion of pills into the black market, if it chose to do so. "The DEA has been the only entity to have all of this data at their fingertips, and it could have used the information to consistently monitor the supply of opioids and when appropriate, proactively identify bad actors," said John Parker, spokesman for the Healthcare Distribution Alliance.

Overprescribing by doctors was the "key driver of the crisis," said a former chief executive of McKesson, the nation's largest drug distributor. He added, "At the same time, there clearly were certain pharmacies in West Virginia that were bad actors that McKesson itself terminated."

Poor decisions were made at every point along the drug supply chain, from manufacturers to distributors to pharmacies to doctors. These breakdowns were aggravated by the failure of health care professionals, law enforcement officials and government regulators to control the flow of these drugs. According to recently released information, the industry shipped 76 billion oxycodone and hydrocodone pills across the United States from 2006 through 2012, and the pill numbers increased from 8.4 billion in 2006 to 12.6 billion in 2012.

The industry was supposed to self-regulate and report suspicious orders for prescription drugs. But the plaintiffs suing the drug companies allege that the industry focused on selling more and more pills. *Fox News* reports that one court filing reveals the greed of drug company executives who were anxious to sell opioid painkillers. "If you are low, order more," executive Victor Borelli emailed to a distributor. "If you are okay, order a little more."

Even when government investigations led to penalties being imposed on drug companies, the fines were trivial compared to their overall corporate revenue. For instance, the drug distributor McKesson was fined \$150 million in 2017. Its net income that year was \$5 billion.

According to *The Washington Post*, the new data show that large numbers of pills were shipped into central Appalachia, particularly coal country, where many people have endured hardship and job injuries. Their need for

painkillers, combined with a focus in the medical community on freeing people from pain, led to greater use of the opioid painkillers being marketed by the drug industry.

As a result, painkillers arrived in large amounts in small-town pharmacies, and some made their way to street corners and to the black market. "Some communities," reports *Fox News*, "including several in West Virginia and Kentucky, received more than 100 pills each year for every person who lived in the community." Since 1996, prescription opioid overdoses have killed more than 200,000 people in the United States.

Fortunately, a crackdown on unethical doctors and pharmacists, combined with tighter prescription guidelines, has helped to lower the number of overdoses due to prescription drugs. But the drug epidemic is still a problem, with deaths from fentanyl continuing to rise, along with increases in deaths from cocaine and methamphetamine.

Questions of accountability are now being raised in courtrooms, including a federal court in Cleveland. Approximately 2,000 separate lawsuits have been filed against drug companies by counties, cities and towns across the United States. Although the drug companies have denied wrongdoing, the court cases could lead to a massive settlement, comparable to what happened with the tobacco industry in years past.

Here are some Bible verses and a question outline to guide our discussion:

Proverbs 28:13

No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. (No context needed.)

Ecclesiastes 5:10

The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity. (For context, read 5:8-10.)

Romans 14:10-12

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (For context, read 14:1-12.)

Prayer for the Right Use of God's Gifts (BCP p.827)

Almighty God, whose loving hand *hath* given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor *thee* with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of *thy* bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.