

“Bigger Barns?”
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First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Luke 12:13-21

A 6th grade teacher posed the following problem to her math class:

“A wealthy man dies and leaves ten million dollars. One-fifth is to go to his wife, one-fifth is to go to his son, one-sixth to his butler, and the rest to charity. Now, what does each get?”

After a very long silence in the classroom, little Joey raised his hand.

The teacher called on Joey for his answer.

With complete sincerity in his voice, Joey answered, “A lawyer!”

He’s probably right. The old expression, “Where’s there’s a will, there’s a way” could also be said “Where there is a will, there’s often a lawsuit.” And that’s basically what was going on in the scene we read about today. A man – most likely a younger brother – asks Jesus, actually *tells* Jesus to intervene in a family squabble about an inheritance. The law of the day was clear on this. The older brother was to get two-thirds of the inheritance, and the younger brother was to get one-third. Fair or not, that was the way it worked, and this man apparently wasn’t happy about that system. He wanted Jesus to tell the older brother that it really ought to be fifty-fifty. He wasn’t paying attention to what was going on. Before this man makes his demand of Jesus, Jesus is teaching them about a variety of subjects, including reliance on the Holy Spirit. But this man was preoccupied with this inheritance issue, and so he waited for Jesus to take a breath and then said that Jesus should step into this issue of money and possessions. Jesus did step in, but I don’t think it was the way the man had in mind.

Jesus told the man – and those who were gathered around – a story about another man. But before He told the parable, Jesus introduced it with this line: “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Or, as *The Message* paraphrase has it, “Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.”

Life is not defined by what you have. Jesus saw that this man was most interested in what he had – or, what he *wanted* to have. He wanted a larger portion of the inheritance. He wasn’t interested in what Jesus was teaching about the Holy Spirit; only in how to grab a bigger piece of the pie.

So Jesus told a story about another man. This man was “rich,” but Jesus did not say that the man’s wealth came from illicit means or anything like that. Jesus does not say here that wealth is necessarily bad. The issue is greed and selfishness. This wealthy man’s lands produce a bumper crop and now he has a problem on his hands. What can he do about this crop that is too large for his barns? He has more than he can possibly use and he cannot even store it all, but he apparently doesn’t consider using this excess to help someone else. Notice that the man’s conversation doesn’t even involve someone else; it’s actually a monologue. In three sentences, he uses *twelve* pronouns to refer to himself: “What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?” Then he said, ‘*I* will do this: *I* will pull down *my* barns and build larger ones, and there *I* will store all *my* grain and *my* goods. And *I* will say to *my* soul, Soul, *you* have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

This man had a total preoccupation with himself. His interest was in himself only. This was true in both the earthly realm and the heavenly realm. In the earthly realm, he had no interest in sharing the excess of his harvest with those in need around him. It would have been easier to share the extra wheat with his neighbors than to tear down his barns and build new, larger ones. Such an idea apparently didn’t occur to him. He doesn’t even seem to follow the Jewish law about

gleaning, found in Leviticus 19 “⁹When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest...you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.” In the heavenly realm, though, the man’s sin was that he was relying only on himself. *I’ll store my grain and my goods and then I’ll have enough to be self-sufficient. Then, I’ll have the good life.* He did not consider that life is a gift from God and that we are always dependent on God. We are interdependent with our neighbors and we are dependent on God. This man forgot all of that. He seems to worship the not-so-holy trinity of “me, myself, and I.” His foolishness is not in trying to make provision for the future. It is in believing that he can secure the future by his own actions. None of us knows what tomorrow – or even today – will bring, as this man found out when his life was over that very night.

Money and possessions can have that effect on us. We can get a case of the “if only’s.” We can think that if only we had a little bit more in the bank or if only the car or the mortgage were paid off or if only *fill in the blank*, everything would be OK. We would be set. We would be “financially independent” or even “happy.” We forget that we are always *dependent* on God. God did not create us to be completely independent beings. He created us for relationship, with one another and with God.

The other problem is that those “if only’s” actually never go away. John D. Rockefeller, one of the wealthiest persons in all history, is reported to have been asked “How much money is enough?” He replied, “Just a little bit more.” It seems to be human nature to never be satisfied. The “if only’s” continue to come for even the wealthiest because we count on our money to fulfill us. We love to shop for more, more, more. People in our culture even brag about being “shopaholics.” But all of those *things* can become our gods. They become barriers between us and the one true God. Having moved in the last year, I can tell you that the many *things* that we have accumulated over the years are weighing on me. There are way too many boxes with unknown

contents in our basement, waiting to be dealt with. When my mind is drawn to the “mess in the basement,” I can’t be fully engaged with my family or my God.

Randy Alcorn, in his book *The Treasure Principle*, describes our problem like this: “It’s a matter of basic physics. The greater the mass, the greater the hold that mass exerts. The more things we own – the greater their total mass – the more they grip us, setting us in orbit around them. Finally, like a black hole, they suck us in . . . Every item we buy is one more thing to think about, talk about, clean, repair, rearrange, fret over, and replace when it goes bad.”

He goes on: “Let’s say I get a television for free. Now what? I hook up the antenna or subscribe to a cable service. I buy a new DVD player. I rent movies. I get surround-sound speakers. I buy a recliner so I can watch my programs in comfort. This all costs money. But it also takes large amounts of time, energy, and attention.

“The time I devote to my TV and its accessories means less time for communicating with my family, reading the Word, praying, ...or ministering to the needy.”

He ends with this question: “So what’s the true cost of my ‘free’ television?” (54)

Does that resonate with you? I know it does with me. The more things we have, the more time and money we spend on them, and the less time we spend storing up treasures in heaven.

Many of you may remember the old Jack Benny skit in which he is walking down the street and is approached by an armed robber. The robber says, “Your money or your life!” There is a long pause. Jack does nothing. The robber impatiently says, “Well, which is it gonna be, your money or your life?” Jack replies, “Don’t rush me, I’m thinking it over.”

Maybe it’s that way with us. We’d have to consider if we can go on living without our money, without our things. A few years ago, my friend and I were robbed at gunpoint. The robber took a few possessions, mostly my iPod and cell phone. In the moments which followed, I was very upset about those lost items and my friend who was with me reminded me to be grateful by yelling at me “Eric, we’re alive!” It was a good perspective for me to remember that my life was

worth much more than some pieces of technology. When we talked with the police later, they were very surprised that we weren't shot, as that city was in the midst of a string of similar incidents where the victim *had* been shot. I truly was blessed to have been spared! Really, the Jack Benny skit is a stretch. The truth is we *wouldn't* have to think it over, and that should tell us something. In such a moment, it's easy to choose your life over everything else and in that moment, there was no questioning whether I would give up those items to save my life. Deep down, we know what is important. It's life. It's relationships, with God and with our loved ones and neighbors. It is getting to wake to another day, full of promises and potential. It is the ability to store up treasures in heaven.

There's a story of a wealthy CEO who, while on vacation, was stunned to find a fisherman lying idly beside his small boat in the middle of the day. "Why aren't you out fishing?" said the business executive. "Because I have caught enough fish for the day," said the fisherman. The CEO responds, "Well, why don't you catch some more?" "Well, what would I do with more?" The CEO replies, "You could earn more money. Then you could have a motor put into your boat and you could go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough to buy nylon nets. These would bring you still more fish, and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats, and eventually maybe even a fleet of boats. You could really catch a lot of fish then and you would be a rich man like me." The fisherman said, "OK, what would I do then?" The CEO said, "Well, *then* you could really enjoy life." "What do you think I am doing right now?" came the reply.

Our culture teaches us to push and push and push, to earn more and more so that we can shop more and more, and store up more and more. We are a nonstop society, always on the go. We forget that our lives might be demanded of us this very night. We think that there is always more time and that we can get to what is important later. We need to spend more time enjoying life now. We need to spend more time helping our neighbors when our crops are too abundant for

our barns. We need to store up treasure in heaven, because we cannot take any of what we've stored in our barns with us. We must remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 6, " 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' "

Working hard and attaining wealth are not themselves problems. It is our *attitude* toward those things which matters. If we have no time for God or family or ministry to others, then our hard work is in vain. It keeps us from what is important. What's important to God? Jesus told us the most important commandments are "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." It's about loving God and others with all that we have. If we have wealth, but do not use it for the good of others and for the service and worship of God, then we are not loving God and others. We are storing up treasures for ourselves only, or "fill[ing] [our] barns with Self" as *The Message* puts it. So, what's in our barns? Where are we storing our treasures? Amen