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Luke 12:13-21
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The Poor Rich Man

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Let me start by asking you a question: How many of you can say that you're content when it comes to your money and possessions? If you raised your hand, here's another question: How many of you are still pursuing more money and more possessions? It's kind of like when I go out to eat, I can be very content, totally stuffed even, but when that dessert tray comes around, I want more!

As we continue in the Gospel of Luke, we're faced with this whole issue of the place that money and possessions play in our lives. That's what I both love and hate about working through books of the Bible—I love that I don't have to choose what topic to speak on next; but I hate that I don't get to avoid topics that I'm not real comfortable with. I don't like to talk about money in church. I'm often embarrassed by the high pressure tactics used in churches to get more money. But I'm also aware that Jesus talked about money more than any other subject. He talked about money more than he talked about heaven and hell. He obviously thought it was pretty important. Whether you're rich or poor or just getting by, he obviously thought this was an area that was central to the success or failure of our spiritual lives.

But most of us really don't see it as that big of an issue. I mean, how many of us would really say that one of our biggest struggles in being a follower of Christ is greed? Thursday morning at Men's Fraternity I taught on the story of David and Goliath. The giant Goliath represents the sin in our life that we battle every day. Some of our sins are like giants—how could we ever overcome them? I asked the guys to share in their small groups what sin is like a giant in their life. Many of the men said that their giant is lust. So what do we do? We hold each other accountable in that area. We pray for each other. We try to build a hedge around ourselves to keep from falling. We put filters on our internet access, we cancel our cable channels and get rid of all the Victoria Secret catalogues. We take pains to be obedient in this area.

But I've seldom heard of anyone, men or women, take the same approach to the problem of greed, yet Jesus talks about that a lot more than he does lust. After all, this is one of the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt not covet. It doesn't matter if it's your neighbor's house or his salary or his wife; that's talking about greed.

The problem with greed is that it can so easily disguise itself as something else. This is what happens as a man approaches Jesus and asks him to get involved in

an inheritance dispute.

1. The would be fool (vv.13-15)

"Someone in the crowd said to Him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me'" (v. 13). Jesus has been teaching, and all of a sudden this unknown guy raises his hand. We don't know who he is, but he's involved in an inheritance dispute with his brother. He sees Jesus as a rabbi and rabbi's often made judgments about these kinds of matters. Jewish law said that the older brother got double the inheritance of land as the younger brothers. This is probably a younger brother who felt like he was getting gipped of his part of the inheritance. But notice he didn't come to Jesus with a request; he came to him with a demand. He wasn't asking for Jesus to decide who was right; he believed he was right and so he simply demanded that Jesus tell his brother what to do.

A couple of things strike me about this. It strikes me that this request seems to come out of nowhere. Jesus has been talking about very important matters just prior to this. He's been talking about hypocrisy and persecution and even salvation, and then, out of the blue, this guy from the crowd raises this issue of his inheritance. Isn't it interesting how material issues can become such a preoccupation that we're blinded to the spiritual realities that God is trying to communicate to us? That's what happened to this guy. He has the Son of God who has come to save his soul right in front of him, but he's all caught up in his inheritance. How often we are like that, so caught up in trying to demand our earthly rights and blinded to what God is doing.

It also strikes me how these things still divide family members. How many families have been torn apart by disputes about money? I heard a story about a woman with five sisters. They had grown up in a small Midwestern town where her father became a successful banker. She had gone off to a university, but her sisters stayed close to home, married, and settled down. She had settled on the West Coast. When her father died, she and her husband hurried home for the funeral. As they comforted her mother, they noticed that everything in the house had been tagged by the other sisters with their names—Judy's, Margaret's, Annie's. She and her husband were appalled but said nothing. The table was set, and dinner was served, and the conversation was awkward. Then her husband stood, stepped behind their mother's

chair, and said, “Everyone’s tagged what they want. We’re placing our tag on what we want.” And he placed his hands on their mother’s shoulders.

You see, there are more important things. One study estimates baby boomers and their parents will transfer wealth and other assets worth at least \$41 trillion dollars to family members and charities over the next 47 years. I wonder if that will be a good thing for those families?

Maybe that’s why Jesus responds to this man the way he does. Look at v. 14. **“But He said to him, ‘Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?’”** Jesus addresses this guy pretty harshly. He says, “Man...” That’s not a real nice way of talking. He says, “I’m not Judge Wopner. This is not the People’s Court. I’ve got more important things to deal with than your disputes about inheritance.”

And then he turns and issues a warning, not just to him but to all who listened. And what he does is get to the deeper issue that was behind this guy’s request. Jesus always does that. We come to him with our issues and Jesus says, “Let’s talk about something else. Let’s talk about why this is so important to you. Let’s talk about your heart.” You see, Jesus will not judge in this man’s inheritance claim, but he will judge his heart. He’s much more concerned about this man losing his soul than he is losing his money. Look what he says in v. 15. **“Then He said to them, ‘Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.’”**

Jesus starts out and he warns against all kinds of greed. The word simply means the desire to have more. The Bible is laced with warnings against greed. “Beware,” he says. “Be on constant guard.” So we may not think this is an important issue, but Jesus does. How can we assume this is not a real problem for us when Jesus said, “Beware of this. Don’t ever let your guard down. It comes in all shapes and sizes.” We think greed is only a problem for the rich and famous. No. Look right here. This guy probably has a legitimate gripe. His brother is ripping him off. The law is clear about these matters—he should get his fair share. He has a family to feed. He had kids to send to college. So we can have what on the surface is a legitimate claim to our rights, but Jesus says, “Look at your heart. What’s behind all this? Why are you putting so much energy into this? Why can’t you let this go?”

It reminds me of 1 Corinthians 6 where Paul writes to the church there rebuking them for suing their brothers and sisters in Christ in the secular courts. He says you ought to take care of this in the church; this is a terrible witness to the world. Paul says in v.7, “The very fact that you have lawsuits among you

means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” You see, there is something more important than money and stuff, so if it’s going to destroy your family or your church, let it go!

And then Jesus lays down the reason: “for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” It doesn’t matter how much you have, life is about more than stuff. You see, Jesus is just looking out for us. He wants us to have real life; abundant life, and he says you don’t get that through getting more money or more stuff.

Most of us would agree with that. As a matter of fact, in that study I mentioned earlier about all the money that will be inherited in the next few decades, 77 percent of those polled said the most important inheritance they could receive or pass on would not be the money but values and lessons about life. I read that and thought, “How wonderful. I guess we have this problem of greed licked in our country. I’m so glad people don’t care that much about the money.” Yeah, right! Give me a break! It’s so easy to say it’s not about the money when you have the money or will get the money. But what about when you’re getting ripped off? And why is it that the advertising industry is still paid billions of dollars to lure us with the promise of abundant life if we just get more stuff and better stuff? Because it works. And why does the average American shop six hours a week while spending 40 minutes a week playing with his kids? And why is it that while most American Christians pay lip service to the fact that we should give at least 10% of our income, studies show the actual average we give is between two and three percent? You see, what we say and how we live are two very different things.

2. A real fool (vv. 16-20).

Maybe that’s why Jesus turns and tells a story; a parable. Stories have a way of sneaking up on us; a way of getting beneath the surface; of making us look in the mirror. Listen to the story of the poor rich man in vv. 16-20.

“And He told them a parable, saying, ‘The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, “What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “This is what I will do: I will tear 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 many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.’” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’”

A. His problem and his plan: So here is a rich man. He’s already rich when the story begins, but he is blessed with a bumper crop. As we say, the rich get richer. But sometimes getting richer poses problems, like what do we do with all this money and all this stuff. This rich man had a storage problem. So, like any good businessman, he

tries to think through how to manage his assets. He comes up with a plan. He'll tear down his old barns and build bigger barns where he can store his grain. Sounds like a prudent decision to me. And then Jesus gives a little more insight into his thinking. He says this man says to himself, "Self, you pretty much have it made. You've saved up enough so that you don't even have to work anymore. You can kick back and enjoy your retirement."

Now if Jesus had just ended the story there it would be like the American dream. But then in v. 20 we get two rather daunting words. Lives turn on these two words: "But God..." God has the last word in this man's life and God doesn't congratulate him on his prudent business decisions. God calls him a fool. God says what you thought was wise planning was in fact utter foolishness. And God says two things to explain that. First, he says, "This very night your soul is required of you." That means it's time to die. Your number is up. (Remember that show *Touched By An Angel*? Remember when that one angel showed up it always meant the same thing—Oh no! Someone is going to die! That's what this means). Second, he says, "now who will own what you have prepared?" We don't know much about this guy's kids, but most likely they were the kind of kids that had everything handed to them, so who knows, they'll probably just waste it all. This guy hadn't thought about that. The writer of Ecclesiastes at least had the sense to say, "**I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?.. This too is meaningless**" (Ecc.2:18-19).

Jesus concludes with kind of a moral of the story. Look at v. 21. "**So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.**" So Jesus broadens it out and says, "Really, this a story about anyone who is rich in material possessions but not rich in the things pertaining to God."

You see, the man's problem was not simply that he was rich. It was not that he had a lot of stuff. One of the things we have to realize from this story is that God had blessed this man. God had allowed him to become wealthy and then to have a bumper crop. God blesses the righteous and the unrighteous, but it all comes from him. God has blessed you with what you have. Very few of us in this room would say that we're wealthy. We have huge rents and mortgages and tuition payments and car payments and gas bills. I mean, we can barely afford those trips to Starbucks...12 times a week! But most of us know that compared to the rest of the world we ARE wealthy. But that's not the problem here. As long as you earn an honest living, there is no sin in having what you have. God is the one who has blessed us.

But the problem with the man in the story is that he didn't really seem to get that. You see, if God gives you something, it stands to reason that you should use it in a way that he intends. We're not owners; we're managers. But

this man believed that his stuff was HIS stuff and he could do with his stuff whatever he pleased. Notice how many times in this story he says "my." He talks about "my crops...my barns...my grain...my goods." In other words, it's all MINE! And because he believed that he talks only about what "I will do with my stuff." Notice how many times the "I" word is used in his little speech, "What shall I do...I have no where to store my crops...this is what I will do...I will tear down my barns...I will store all my grain..." And then to cap it all off, he consults not with God, not even with other people in his community about his little plan. He says, "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul...'" This guy is entirely self-consumed. He even talks to himself. Do you see yourself as an owner or a manager? He doesn't give you assets; he entrusts you with assets.

It doesn't matter that this guy is being prudent with his stuff. Greed can mask itself as prudent planning for the future. I'm all for saving; most of us probably don't save enough. I'm all for planning for our kids to go to college and for some kind of retirement. But we always have to ask the question, "God, what do you want me to do with this? You've blessed me with it. It comes from you. It belongs to you. I don't have the right to use it the way I want to."

As a matter of fact, it's not just your assets, it's your whole life. When God said to the rich fool, "Your soul is required of you," he uses a word that is often used of the return of a loan. God is saying, "I loaned you your soul, your life. Now I am asking for it back." This man didn't know that not just his stuff but his life was on loan from God. Do you know that? Do you have loans? Most of us have loans we're paying off. We have obligations to our debtors. Well, your life has been loaned to you and you have an obligation to God.

That word "obligation" can be a little bit misleading, though. The fact of the matter is, when we come to grips with the fact that God sent his only Son for us, that Jesus himself divested himself of his own divine privileges for us, and that he gave his life for us as an offering for sin so that we could spend eternity with him, we'll want nothing more than to use our money to serve his purposes. Last week we celebrated my wife's birthday and this week is my son's birthday. I love my wife. I love my son. There is nothing I enjoy more than blessing them on their birthdays. I go way overboard for birthdays. I probably spend more than I should on them. But that's what you do when you love someone.

This person was a fool because he really didn't seem to reckon with the fact that God could come along at any time and say, "This is it. Your time is up." He had his whole retirement planned. How many people have you known who busted their rear ends to save for their retirement only to die a month after they

got the gold watch? It happens all the time. So what really matters is not how well you prepared for retirement but how well you prepared for heaven. Jesus says what matters is being “rich towards God” What does that mean? It means to invest your money and your stuff and your very life wisely. Invest it in that which will last for eternity. Invest it in the things of God.

Next week we will look at what Jesus has to say about the problem of worry as it relates to money and possessions, but I want to skip ahead and read what he says towards the end of that speech. **"Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"** (vv. 33–34).

I wish I could soften that a bit. I know that Jesus didn't necessarily mean for all of us to go out and sell everything we have and give the money to the poor. There are other Scriptures that are clear about that. The emphasis is on using our money and possessions to further the work of the Kingdom of God and to help those around us who are in need. I got an e-mail this weekend about IJM's work in Thailand rescuing childhood victims of the sex trafficking trade. Recently they rescued 92 girls. They were asking for money to continue their work. That's an opportunity for me to be rich towards God...or I could buy a new TV. It comes down to what I value. Do I value this life and what I can store up for myself in 80 years or so, or do I value eternity? Make no mistake: we will either have our treasure here or we will have it there. You can't play it both ways.

CONCLUSION

Randy Alcorn, in his excellent little book, *The Treasure Principle*, uses a helpful analogy. Imagine that you're living at the end of the Civil War. You live in the South, but you're a Northerner. You plan to move home as soon as the war is over. While in the South you've accumulated lots of Confederate currency. But what if you knew for a fact that the North was going to win the war and the end is imminent. What would you do with your Confederate money? If you're smart, there is only one answer. You would immediately cash in your Confederate money for U. S. money—the only money that will have any value when the war is over. You would keep only enough Confederate currency to meet your short-term needs.

Jesus has told us that this world is like the Confederacy. The end is near. Earth's currency will become worthless either when Christ returns or when you die, whichever comes first. The smartest thing to do is take that currency and use it to invest in his kingdom. Are you doing that?