

CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A CHURCH THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE BY GIVING FOR ETERNITY

Luke 12: 13-21 & 32-34

INTRODUCTION

When I was a young man I heard a wise old pastor say in a sermon that he could tell more about a person's spiritual condition by looking at the ledger of his checkbook than by any other single thing. Richard Halverson, the former chaplain to the US Senate agrees as he has said, "Jesus Christ said more about money than about any other single thing because, when it comes to a man's real nature, money is of first importance. Money is an exact index to a man's true character. All through the Scripture there is an intimate correlation between the development of a man's character and how he handles his money." My old pastor and Rev. Halverson are merely repeating what their Lord taught as we heard in v. 34 of our text this morning, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." What you do with your money is an infallible indicator as to the condition of your soul. How you handle money and possessions reveals what your heart truly trusts and loves, regardless of what you say.

We see this clearly revealed in the case of the "wee little man" the tax-collector, named Zacchaeus. If you'll remember, while Jesus was at his house for lunch he stood up and said, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus responds to this declaration with one of his own, "Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." In other words, Jesus knew with absolute certainty that Zacchaeus had been born again by the Holy Spirit and was one of God's elect because of his cheerful willingness to give away half of his possessions and to repay all that he had stolen by a factor of four, which, in the case of a tax-collector would have been a considerable amount of money. Zacchaeus' joyful generosity proved that he was trusting in Christ as his Savior and Lord alone.

Throughout the pages of the Bible a consistent characteristic of God's people is generosity. Whether rich or poor, whether living in times of economic prosperity or economic collapse, God's people do not hoard their resources but use them to provide not only for their own needs but also for the needs of others. We are a people who cheerfully give our money for the glory of God and the good of others. In Luke 12 we are going to discover some of the reasons as to why it is that Christians do not hoard but cheerfully give away their money and possessions to meet the needs of others.

MAIN POINT

Christians do not hoard money or things but joyfully and generously give because...

I. We don't want God to call us a fool (vv. 13-21)

I think it would be hard to find a more American story than the one we have recorded for us in Luke 12:13-21. Our courts are overloaded with lawsuits owing to the exact grievance stated by the stranger who speaks up in the crowd. The parable that Jesus tells in response to this man's complaint is his assessment of the American Dream. Jesus is in the midst of a lecture to his disciples. A huge crowd of people surrounds them. Luke tells us in v. 1 of this chapter that there are so many people who have come out to see Jesus that they are in danger of trampling one another. It is like a rock concert or a soccer match in a European stadium. However, he is not talking to the crowds but to his disciples (v.1), warning them about the dangers of fearing men rather than God. While Jesus is in the midst of this very serious discussion with his disciples, a man in the crowd shouldered his way up to the inner circle and demands that Jesus tell his brother to share with him their father's inheritance.

Apparently, this man's father has died and the brother has refused to give to this man his share of the inheritance. We aren't told how the brother has prevented this man from getting his share of the money, but he

has. This is unfair, right? All the children are to share in the inheritance, not just one. Most likely the brother is in the audience and this man is seeking to humiliate his brother in public and to get the endorsement of a highly respected religious teacher for his position. This is a carefully and cunningly crafted attempt to force his brother to accede to his demands. Can't you just imagine the arguments that have raged between these two brothers since their father's death? Each accuses the other of injustice and dishonoring their father.

Jesus immediately sees through this demand for "justice". He says two things. First (v. 14), he says in effect, I did not come into the world to settle family squabbles. He is indignant that this younger brother would attempt to drag him into the matter. He is not one of the judges in Israel and thus has no authority to rule in such matters and so he recognizes this for what it is, an attempt to humiliate and intimidate. He understands that these two brothers' biggest problem isn't the fair division of their father's estate. The most important thing that is going on in the world isn't who is going to get the money. When you are embroiled in a conflict, especially when that conflict involves money, don't you feel that this is the most important thing in the world? What we say is, "Surely God is on the side of the oppressed and I'm the oppressed one in this relationship. It's not fair that I am being cheated out of money." Jesus' rebuke is a slap to the face of self-absorbed people like us. This younger brother was not living in submission to Christ but yet he wants Christ to act authoritatively on his behalf. Like so many, he's only interested in using God and his authority to get what he wants. The second thing he tells them and us (v. 15) is that their argument merely exposes what their hearts truly love and what they truly love is not God. They are both full of greed and believe that life is about having money and what money can buy. Each brother is consumed with getting what belongs to him because they are convinced that having money is the most necessary thing in the world. This conflict is not about justice but about greed.

Then Jesus tells the story of a farmer who experienced the fulfillment of the American Dream. He gets an early retirement with a huge portfolio of blue chip stocks. He wins the lottery through a bumper crop. He has enough to last him for many years to come and so he plans on relaxing and enjoying all the pleasures that this life affords to those who don't have to work and yet have plenty of money to support their lifestyle. He has what most Americans dream of attaining. He doesn't have to work for a living and can spend all his time golfing, fishing, shopping, taking care of his yard, visiting his grandchildren, going on an annual cruise, traveling to foreign countries, eating out every night at fine restaurants, etc. He has the dream retirement package. He is young and healthy and he has plenty of money to last him for a long time to come.

In v. 20 Jesus says that God calls this man a fool. We would not call this man a fool. We would call him fortunate. We would want to be in the same position as he. Our financial planners would commend him for his wise planning and careful preservation of capital so he can live off the interest and not use up his principal. What happened to this man is what most Americans dream for themselves. Except for that one tiny detail--he died before he got to enjoy what he had so carefully preserved. Again, we would call his death tragic, not proof that he was a fool. My dear friends, you dare not hear this story and not put yourself into it. Verse 19 is the dream of most Americans. It is what we are planning to experience no later than when we reach 65 and hopefully, much earlier. Listen to what Jesus says, he says that people who aim to lay up plenty so that they can take life easy are fools.

Why does God call the American dream a fool's dream? There are several reasons that this rich man was a fool. First, in v. 16 Jesus says that the rich man's field produced a good crop. Then the rich man asks himself, "What shall I do with my crops?" The point is that the crops were given to him. They are not his crops. He didn't produce them, the ground did. Or more accurately, God did; as Psalm 104:14 says, "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate-- bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart." The first mistake fools make is not recognizing that all that we have comes from God and is owned by God. He only asks himself what he should do with this unexpected bounty. He does not ask God what God wants him to do with the prosperity that God has given to him. The second mistake he makes is assuming that all that he has is for his own enjoyment. He not only gives no thought to what God might want but he gives no thought to the needs of his neighbors. Third, he shows that for him, life consists of enjoying the pleasures of not working and then eating and drinking and

making himself happy with the amusements of this life. For him life is not about God but about maximizing pleasure here. Fourth he forgets that he is mortal. He lives as if he is in control of life and death and he acts as though he is not going to die. Fifth, he forgets that when he dies, he must answer to God for how he lived. In other words, he does not remember that what he does here will reverberate throughout all of eternity. Because he is not rich towards God in this life he will live in poverty in the next life, i.e. in hell. Fools don't go to heaven. They go to hell.

What is so striking about this man is how ordinary his life is in America. We are rich people. According to Randy Alcorn in his book, "Money, Possessions and Eternity", "If you made only \$1,500 last year that is more than 80% of the people on earth... If you live in a house or apartment and have a reasonably reliable mode of transportation, you are in the top 15% of the world's wealthiest people. If you have any money saved, a hobby that requires some equipment or supplies, a variety of clothes in your closet, two cars in any condition and live in your own home, you are in the top 5% of the world's wealthy." I know that many of us don't feel so rich right now. Some have lost their jobs. Many fear their job is next. If you own a home you've lost 20% of the value of that home this past year. Anyone who has money invested in the financial markets has just received their end of the year statements for 2008 and most have seen their investments lose 30-40% of their value. If you need that money now for college or retirement or some other need that is a fear-producing fact. However, even in spite of these facts, we yet remain a wealthy people. The vast majority of us are still planning on retiring and being able to maintain our current lifestyle.

To be "rich towards God" doesn't mean you have to plan on working at your present job for the rest of your life. It does mean you can't plan on living the last decades of your life pursuing your hobbies and keeping your lawn in good order. This doesn't mean that it is wrong to save money for our later years. In fact, the Bible commends saving for known future need. Proverbs 21:20 says, "In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has." Proverbs 6:6-8 says, "Go to the ant, you sluggard, consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in the summer and gathers its food at harvest." Ants have enough sense to store up provision in a time of abundance in order to prepare for a known time of scarcity. Sending kids to college is expensive, so saving for college is wise. Your car will wear out, so saving for a car is wise. There is going to come a day when we will not be able to work to support ourselves. It is right to prepare for that day. We must not presume upon others to care for us. However, the goal of life is not to invest enough money so that I can live off the interest and never touch the principal for thirty years. The goal of life is not to be able to retire and live a life of luxury for several decades. Randy Alcorn makes a very scorching observation, "For some people, retirement has replaced the return of Christ as the 'blessed hope', the major future event that we anticipate."

The way to not be called a fool by God requires us to be rich towards God. This means at least three things. First, I acknowledge that all I have comes from God and is owned by God. I don't treat the things I have as mine for my own private use but as God's. He gives me all that I have to provide for my needs and my family's needs and to use for the advancement of his kingdom and the welfare of my neighbor. Second, with my regular income and with any extra money I receive the first thing I do is not ask what luxury item I can now afford but rather I go to God and ask him what he would have me do with this money he has given me. The foolishness of the rich farmer is seen in his talking to himself, not God. He only thinks of what would please him, not what would please God or his neighbor. Third, I always remember that this life is temporary and all these pleasures are fleeting. You and I are going to live forever and what matters in heaven is what should matter to us now. What does not matter in heaven is how much stuff you accumulate now. Therefore we dare not make the accumulation of money and things and spending our time in leisure the goal of life.

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- *And because...*

II. We are secure in the love of God (v. 32)

I'm skipping over vv. 22-31 and going right to vv. 32-34 because of their connection to the parable of the rich fool. These three verses tell us what the rich fool ought to have done. They are excellent instructions for Americans. Jesus begins by assuring us of God's tender love for us. He commands us not to be afraid that we will not have enough to sustain our physical life. There are different motives for accumulating money and things. Some people do so out of pride, to show off their success. Some imagine that large amounts of money give them power over life and over others. Some accumulate out of pleasure. They love new things. Just like alcohol produces pleasure so buying stuff gives many people pleasure. But most people, I think, hoard money out of fear. We are afraid we won't have enough if the economy goes bad or our health fails or we lose our job. Again, it is not wrong to save for known or expected future need. However, we dare not save now because we are afraid that God won't provide for us later. The same God who supplies our need today is going to be around 30 years from now.

Immediately upon commanding us not to be afraid he calls us a "little flock." The point is that we have as much power over our lives as a flock of newborn lambs has over their lives. When we act as though we are capable of securing our future we are acting like little lambs boldly tripping about in a forest full of wolves and lions. We are weak, dependent creatures. As we have recently experienced, in a moment, all that we have saved and accumulated can be taken from us or we can be taken from it. Most of us are a car crash, or an economic downturn or serious illness away from financial ruin. The reason to not fear is not because of our wise financial planning or because the Federal Government will bail us out of this mess. Rather the reason to not fear is because our Father in heaven was delighted to give to us the kingdom.

There are three things that this simple statement tells us. First, God gave the kingdom to us; we didn't earn entry into the kingdom of God. To belong to God's kingdom is a free gift purchased for us through the work of another. You know that about gifts, don't you? Every gift costs the giver. When you are given a gift, someone spent time and effort and money to give that gift to you. In the case of God's kingdom, our being given this gift cost the eternal Son of God humiliation and death. It is a gift of grace. We are by nature rebels against the rule of God. We are El Qaida in God's kingdom. We hate God and are out to overthrow his rule. It makes as much sense for God to give us his kingdom as it would for the U.S. to put Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants in charge of Homeland Security. Osama bin Laden should be executed not put in charge of Homeland Security. So God is able to justly give us the kingdom only because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The second thing I want you to notice it was his delight to do so. This word "delight" is used for how God the Father feels about God the Son in Luke 3:22. God's motive for giving us the kingdom was his free decision to delight in us, which is the same delight he feels for his eternal son. God's heart overflows with delight for all of us who are in Christ. The Scriptures continually compare the care of human parents for their children with the care of God the Father for the children of his grace. "Which of you fathers, if his son asks for bread will give him a stone or if he asks for a fish will give him a snake? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children how much more will your father in heaven give what is good to those who ask him?" God loves all of us who are in his Son and is delighted to provide our needs like parents delight to provide for their children.

The third thing to notice is that God has given us his kingdom. Jesus is arguing from the greater to the lesser. If God has given us the best thing in the universe, membership in the kingdom of God, then how will he not give us everything we need that is of infinitely lesser value? We have friends that adopted a child from China. They spent thousands of dollars to adopt this child. They took off two weeks from work and flew to China to get the child. When the child is grown will she wonder if they are going to buy her a new pair of shoes? Wouldn't it be weird if the child was afraid that they weren't going to provide shoes after the enormous amount of time and money they've spent to adopt her and the care they've given her for years? They were delighted to adopt her, therefore they will be delighted to provide her with shoes. That is how we are to relate to our Father in heaven. He was delighted to give us the kingdom, therefore we do not need to fear that he will not give us everything we need to live out the days he has granted us on earth. So we can freely give away our money and possessions.

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III. We are living for maximum, eternal pleasure (vv. 33-34)

Jesus is appealing to your desire to be happy in these two verses. He is appealing to your desire to have a secure future that eliminates all worry and fear. The rich ruler prepared for a future that never came. Jesus is telling us how to prepare for a future that will certainly come. You are going to live forever and you want to be forever happy, don't you? You want a purse that will last for eternity and an investment that will never be exhausted. You want to have enough principal saved so that you can live off the interest forever, right? Here is the way to use your present income, your present resources to secure an eternally happy retirement, "Sell your possessions and give to the poor." Jesus is not saying you can buy your way into heaven. What he is saying, as is clear in v. 34, is that the evidence that your heart is fixed upon heaven, that you believe that Christ is your Savior and Lord, is when you sell your possessions and give to the poor. This is what faith always does. The rich fool did not sell his possessions and give to the poor but hoarded them because he did not believe that receiving the kingdom of God was any big deal. He believed that a comfortable life on earth was way better than eternal life with God in his kingdom. He was living by faith in the promise of a life of leisure. We are to live by faith in the infinite value of receiving the kingdom of God by the grace of God in Christ. The way you are rich towards God, the way you demonstrate that you are living for an eternal kingdom is by giving away your wealth in the present. This shows where your heart is and it is the way to direct your heart to heaven. You show you have faith in Christ and are looking forward to living with him forever when you sell your possessions and give your money away to care for the needs of others. To say that you are trusting in Christ and planning on going to heaven but never giving money away for the good of others makes as much sense as saying that you are taking a vacation in Hawaii next year but you never save any money to go or buy the plane tickets or make the reservations. Saying you are going to Hawaii means nothing if not matched with the reallocation of your resources to prepare for going to Hawaii.

How many of our possessions are we to sell? How much of our income are we to give? Jesus is not commanding that we sell all our possessions, though God has called some to do so in the history of the church. Zacchaeus sold half his possessions and Jesus said this was evidence that his heart was fixed upon heaven. All of my possessions belong to the Lord and so I must ask him how much he wants me to give away. It is a fact that as the per capita income of American Christians has risen, the amount we have given as a percentage of income has shrank. Randy Alcorn in his book makes a strong case that giving 10% of our income to God's work of spreading the gospel and caring for the poor ought to be the minimum beginning point for Christians. However, only 1 in 8 "born again" Christians in the U.S. gave 10% or more of their income in 2000. The average amount of income given by American Christians is 2.5%. I don't have time to get into whether or not God commands us to give 10%, but regardless of what you think about the tithe, 2.5% is surely not in keeping with what Jesus is saying here. I know that it is difficult to go from giving nothing to giving 10% but all of us ought to be working each year to increase the level of our giving to at least 10%, always remembering that all of our income and all of our possessions belong to the Lord. We are to never give in such a way that communicates that we've given God his share and now we are free to do what we want with the other 90%.

Please don't miss the motive that Jesus is giving us here. He is not telling us to have pity on the poor or to feel guilty about having so much. He is not saying that God needs your money. He is telling us to put our money somewhere where it will return an eternal benefit. He is commanding that we love ourselves by preparing for a certain future. He is telling us to put our money in a place where it cannot be touched by thieves, recessions or natural disasters. We are to treat money like those who are consumed with investing for the securest possible future. We are always on the hunt for how we can invest more money in heavenly causes so that we can have the largest portfolio possible when we arrive in heaven. People who are investing their money to prepare for

retirement don't grumble and complain every time they write the check to the investment broker. They don't look for ways to decrease their investment, they look for ways to increase it. Because we believe that going to heaven to live with Christ forever is the best thing that could ever happen to us, we give away as much as we can of the resources God gives us so that heaven will be a more glorious experience.

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