

## “Do Not Be Afraid, Little Flock”

Luke 12:13-32

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I'm sure you have seen those little picture puzzles that children like to work. I used to do them when I was a child. You find them in *Highlights* magazine or some other children's papers. It's a picture of some scene—perhaps a park with some children playing jump rope and a mother and father strolling their baby in the baby carriage and an airplane flying by overhead. The caption over the picture would read, “What's Wrong with this Picture?”

So you go back and look more closely and notice that one of the wheels on the baby carriage is square and that the plane flying by overhead is upside down, and you look to try to locate the 17 or so things that are wrong with the picture.

Well, I want you to play that game with me today. I am going to give you a word picture, and I want you to try to figure out what's wrong with the picture.

Here's the picture:

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 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.”

Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought 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’ (Luke 12:13-19).

OK, what's wrong with that picture? Frankly, I don't see anything wrong with that picture. In fact, this guy did what most anybody would have done. He had to have some place to store his bumper crop, so what's so bad about tearing down your barns to build bigger ones?

It would be a lot easier to tell what's wrong with that picture if this man were some sort of sinister, evil man. If the story went that after he came home from building his bigger barns, he beat his wife and children, then it would be easy to say what's wrong here. Or if we knew that he had made his fortune at the expense of others, by exploiting the poor, then it would be easy for us to say what's wrong with this picture.

But there's nothing here to indicate that this man is a bad guy. He's just a farmer who lucked into a good crop one year and decided that it was time to tear down his little barns and build bigger ones. That doesn't sound like a bad thing to do.

So what is wrong with this picture? Well, according to Jesus, what's wrong with the picture is not that the man is wicked or evil; it is that he is a fool. He is a fool because he actually thought that his possessions mattered. He thought there was some connection between the things he had and a meaningful life. He devoted his life to acquiring things because he thought that would give his life meaning and value.

But he was wrong. Jesus continues the parable: “But God said to the man, ‘You fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ And Jesus concludes: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Once again in this parable Jesus is giving us a lesson about things, possessions, money. As long as we can think that this parable is being addressed to someone else, then it doesn't really bother us all that much. As long as we say that this is about rich people—Bill Gates or maybe Donald Trump—then it's not really about us, and it doesn't make us squirm too badly. However, I don't think that we can let ourselves off the hook that easily. Jesus isn't just talking to the ultra rich. He is talking to anyone who is concerned with possessions. . .and that is everyone of us.

You have heard it before—that Jesus said more about money than about any other single subject. We get all worked up talking about sex and personal morality, saying that's what the Bible is about. Jesus, on the other hand, got all worked up talking about money. It's because Jesus understood that our money and our lives are bound up inextricably together. The way we think about our money has a direct impact on the way we live our lives. And the way we use our money is the clearest statement we can make about what we believe to be important.

One place you can read about the Christian understanding of how we are to treat things is in a rather unlikely place, the *Book of Order*, the constitutional document of the Presbyterian Church. The *Book of Order* is a document that in most places downright dull. But occasionally even in the *Book of Order* you stumble across a statement that speaks truth. One of those statements I have printed for you in the bulletin. Follow along as I read it:

Those who follow the discipline of Christian stewardship will find themselves called to lives of simplicity, generosity, honesty, hospitality, compassion, receptivity, and concern for the earth and God's creatures (*Book of Order*, W-5.5005).

That is a remarkable statement. Stewardship is not just about giving some money to the church every once in a while. Stewardship, rightly practiced, leads to all sorts of changes in your life: you become generous, honest, hospitable, compassionate. Your life becomes simpler because you separate the important from the unimportant.

Now I'm not suggesting that this is easy, and I realize that I am swimming upstream here. The current of our society is flowing strongly and swiftly in the opposite direction. All this week, as I have been reflecting on this parable of Jesus, I keep thinking about the commercial that shows people carrying around “their number.” The announcer says that their number the amount they will need to have saved in order to retire the way they want. So the commercial shows people carrying their number with them in a taxicab or on an airplane; they tuck in their number for a good night's sleep. And the commercial promises that if you will just follow their plan, they will show you what to do to protect your number and how to get to where you want to go. The message of the commercial is clear: it's all up to you...so when you have the opportunity to tear down your barns and build bigger ones, you'd better do it.

I went to a retirement seminar about 10 years ago, sponsored by our church's Board of Pensions. At these seminars they go through all the arithmetic to show you what you will

need to have to retire comfortably. The way mine worked out was that for the next ten years if I could save more than I was actually making, I would almost have enough to retire. It's what you have to do if you want to protect "your number."

We live in a society that values the abundance of things. That's why this farmer in Jesus' parable is a fool; he has come to believe that life consists in money and things.

There is another way in which the man in Jesus' parable shows himself to be a fool. It is that the only one he ever talked to was himself. He had this field full of wheat, so, "I said to myself, 'What shall I do? I know; I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I will have everything I need for a long life. I can relax and enjoy life.'"

What's wrong with this picture? It's the picture of a fool. It's the picture of someone who appears to have everything, but in reality has nothing. It's the picture of one who is rich in things, but poor in soul. It's the picture of one who seems to be wise, but who is really a fool.

I've got a problem with this parable that Jesus tells here. My problem is that the parable does a good job of telling us where life's meaning is not found—"life does not consist in the abundance of things"—but it doesn't really tell us where it is found. That's somewhat helpful, but I would like more. In addition to knowing where life's meaning is not found, I would like to know where it is found.

Well, for that, we need to read the next few verses. In fact, Luke in his gospel makes it clear that we are to keep reading because the next verse begins, "Therefore, I tell you...." "Therefore" is a connecting word; it ties together what has just been said with what comes next. "Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing." And then Jesus goes on to say,

Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of this world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well (Luke 12:29-31).

And here's how he ends, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

So there it is: life's meaning is not found in the abundance of things; instead it is found in God, in trusting in God's goodness, in striving for God's kingdom.

Let me conclude this sermon by telling you a story about my grandmother. Grandma died about 20 years ago at age 99, but this story takes place when she was a young thing—88. One evening she decided to take her dog out for a ride in the car. It was dusk, and Grandma and her dog were enjoying the ride. But typical of Grandma, she was paying more attention to the scenery than to the traffic. When the car in front of her stopped, Grandma did not, and there was a minor fender bender. Nobody was hurt. The driver of the other car came back to Grandma's car, and they exchanged names, addresses and phone numbers.

And with that Grandma started her car and went home, without waiting for the police to arrive.

The next morning the police came to her house and gave her a ticket for hit and run. So, Grandma had to go to court. Standing before the judge, my 88-year-old grandmother was asked, "Mrs. Williamson, do you have any convictions?"

And without a moment's hesitation, Grandma said, "Why of course I have convictions. I believe that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior."

For Grandma, those words flowed out naturally and truthfully. And I think it was this conviction that Jesus Christ was her Lord and Savior that gave her a peace that many of us long for. That's where life's meaning and value are found. It's not in things, but in entrusting our lives into the hands of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Amen. ✠