

Whose Will They Be?

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Preaching on:

Luke 12:13–21



Well, if you are going to live a good life... and I think most of you want to live a good life. I could tell... look out there, see those faces, I know you want to live a good life. If you want to live a good life, one of the things that you're going to have to struggle with and figure out is: What is my relationship going to be to money and to stuff, to possessions? And this is something that I know that many of you are struggling with in your lives, right now. It is something that we work through our entire life. What is my relationship going to be to this stuff that I want, but that also stresses me out... to this money that I need, but that also causes me all this anxiety. How am I going to relate to that? And Jesus has, I think some very interesting things to say to us about this... very difficult, but very interesting.

Now, one of them of course, is “Don't be greedy.” And that's part of the lesson from our scripture reading this morning, but it's not the whole lesson at all, I don't think. And I'm not going to get too much into “don't be greedy,” because I think for the most part, even though we might struggle a little bit with greed here and there, and even though the world can often struggle mightily with greed, we know that greed is ugly. When we see greed, even when we see it in ourselves, we generally know that it is ugly. We have heard in our culture and in our scripture, and we have been taught since we were children, “do not be greedy.” Share, be fair with other people. We know that greed not only hurts the world around us and people around us, we know that it hurts us.

But Jesus doesn't just say, “Don't be greedy.” Jesus goes further. Jesus says to his closest disciples, when he calls his disciples, he says, if you want to follow me, you have to leave everything behind. Nothing. You have to leave your job behind. You're going to have to leave your family behind. You're going to have to leave all your responsibilities and your hometown behind. You're going to have nothing. And then you are going to come and follow me. And then Jesus took those disciples and he sent them out into the community to preach and to teach the gospel and to heal the sick. And when they were going on this journey, how did he prepare them? He said, you're not going to take anything with you. You will have no staff. You will have no bag. You will have no purse. You will have no money. You're not going to even have a little bit of food or water. You're going to go with the clothes on your back and the sandals on your feet. And that is it.

And we sometimes hear Jesus offering people advice like the rich young man famously in scripture. The rich young man comes to Jesus. He says, Hey, I've lived a good life. I've done everything I'm supposed to do according to the scripture. I still feel like there's something missing though. And Jesus says, oh yeah, you have one more thing that you need to do. Take everything that you have sell it, give all the money away to the poor and then come and follow me.

This sounds like pretty shocking advice to us. And part of the reason it sounds so shocking is because I, and most likely you, do not live this way. We have some things... we've got a staff, we've got a bag, we've got a purse, we've got more than one pair of shoes, we don't exactly live this way. And so it's shocking to us to hear Jesus recommending it so forcefully throughout scripture. And I want to say, I don't think that Jesus expects us to live this way. This is called voluntary poverty. And I think it's a very special calling for very special people. It was a special calling for those disciples and certain followers and for certain people who really want to excel and meet spiritual challenges and grow spiritually in their life. But it is not what everybody in this life is supposed to do. We cannot all live in voluntary poverty, just like we can't all live in celibacy. And we can't all live in constant prayer, continuous prayer. These are very special vows for people who have a special calling and are on a special path in life.

However, I do think that even though this is not a universal calling and it may not be the calling for you or for me, there is a lesson in Jesus constantly reminding us to give things away and to leave things behind. There is a universal message in that teaching that is meant for all of us (even if we don't live in voluntary poverty) that we often miss. And it is a lesson that is deeper, more fundamental, and more important than just, "Don't be greedy."

Now I want you to take as an example this morning, the landowner in Jesus' parable, the rich landowner. Is this the story of an out of control greed maniac? Does this sound like somebody who's just monstrously greedy and is just the poster child for a greed out of control. This guy's a business owner. He has a bumper crop. He doesn't have any place to store it. So it decides he is going to have bigger barns. And then he's going to be able to live off the proceeds.

Is that greed? I don't know if it is. It sounds a little bit like you or me, right? I mean, if you're a business owner, when the time comes and you have the opportunity, maybe you want to expand your business a little bit. Is that greediness or is that just business? Is that the way the world works? Is wanting to have your golden years be well funded so that you are not suffering, and during that time, when you don't have income coming in, because you're not running your business anymore, is that greedy just to want to have a nest egg that you can rely upon? I don't think that it is.

Can we really say that this landowner is acting immorally by what he is doing? Greed is immoral. This isn't immoral. It's not unethical. We don't even know that this landowner is being uncaring towards other people. Is he so obsessed with his business that he is not loving to his wife or to his children or to his neighbors? Does he not give to charity? Is he somebody who's totally self-obsessed? We don't see that in Jesus's story. That's not the story that Jesus is telling us here. This guy, he's not Ebenezer Scrooge. He's not some miserable old miser.

That's not what we're hearing about here. He's somebody just like you or like me. So yes, of course, don't be greedy, but Jesus is telling us something about ourselves as well. What is he trying to tell us?

Unfortunately, what we sometimes hear that Jesus is trying to tell us in this story, and it makes us quite nervous, is we say this guy, who's not all that different from you or me, the bad man, is super, super greedy. And so God kills him for being greedy, right? If you want bigger barns, God's going to kill you. So don't. Don't tear down your barns and build bigger ones, because that is going to get you the bolt of lightning from heaven. Now, I don't think that's actually the message here. Here's what I think the real message is. And I think you'll hear it in the words.

This is a perfectly average rich man who is making perfectly normal business decisions, but he is relying on his money and his possessions totally and completely to the exclusion of God. And he believes that his wealth and his power and his possessions are going to be able to save him in this life. And just at the moment when he believes that he has made it, and that he is going to be able to savor all of the fruit of his hard labors over the year and becoming someone who is rich and secure, he dies... not because God kills him for building bigger barns, but because everybody dies. Everybody has to leave it all behind at some point.

And then (I love this line) God says to the man, all that stuff that you thought was going to hold you up and protect you, who does it belong to now? Who does it belong to now? I think the lesson here from this parable is that none of us, no matter whether you're rich by luck and accident, or you're poor on purpose, none of us really owns anything at all. And none of us can rely in this life, on our possessions, on our wealth, on our money, however much we may have or not have to keep us going forever. Who owns everything that we have? God does. We are just intermediaries. It's entrusted to us for a short amount of time. And we cannot put our faith in it. Everything is always changing. And there's only one thing that we can rely on.

We think often in this life that, well, if I just had a little bit more, just a little bit more than I have now, then I would be truly happy. And how many times have you thought that in your life? Well, you think it about two weeks after you get whatever you thought was going to make you happy the last time. It always fades. We think if I just had a little bit more money, a little bit more security, well then I would be truly happy. And that happiness always fades. Why? It's because it's the psychology of our human desire. We always want more. And there's always more to want. Whatever level we get to, we always believe that there's something more and we're always disappointed in the end.

And yes, it may be true that having a little more money in this world might make you a little more secure in this world. That is the way that the world works. But you're not always going to be in this world. And at some point, everything that you built up around you in this world to keep you safe, isn't going to be able to keep you safe. That is the nature of our existence. And so who do we rely on?

Jesus has tried to teach us a universal truth in his voluntary poverty that he practices and that he recommends. He's trying to remind us of that universal truth in this parable. And that is that your true happiness can only be

found outside of money and possessions. It can only be found outside of this world. It is somewhere in heaven, which as I told the kids this morning is somewhere in here and somewhere out there, a little bit of both. Your true security in this world has to come from beyond this world, your happiness and your meaning must come from beyond because this world is impermanent. It is always changing. It is always going up and down.

As I'm coming back from my paternity leave over the last two weeks, I have been catching up with a lot of you. And I always put some of our older members first, because I feel like they need me most. And frankly, I'll tell you the other reason I do it, is because the older members, the 65+ crowd, is the crowd I feel like that has the most change going on in their lives. If I don't talk to somebody for two weeks, I don't know what situation they're going to be in two weeks later... constant change.

And as I've spoken to many of our older members over the last two weeks, a lot of you are suffering. Some of you have good news, but many of you are dealing with this change... change in life. What about my finances? Who's going to take care of me? Where am I going to live? Now I have to move. I have to go somewhere else. Can I be independent or not? My friends are dying. My friends are moving away. Who's going to be there to take care of me. How am I going to be able to do it? My health is failing. What is wrong with me? Am I going to get better? Or is this it? There's so much change. I want you to know that I see that change. And I see what you all are going through. And as you know, because you're older and wiser than me, I can't fix it. All I can do is sit with you and love you. And remind you of the One who is with you through all of it.

This world is always changing. Our fortunes are always going up and down. Nothing stays the same. Everything we depend on, sooner or later, is going to disappear. And so in this life, we must realize and learn that no matter what, we must found our happiness and our security in God. Everything else in this world is like a little extra bonus to keep us safe and happy and warm and well fed. But the truth, the fundamental truth, is that it has to start with God. But many of us live our lives as if it starts with a paycheck in the bank. And it starts with food on the table and it starts with clothes on my back and it starts with a great career. And then God is the extra thing that I add on at the end of the week, but that doesn't work and that will eventually run out.

We have to found ourselves, our happiness, and our security, on the thing that is greater than any change, greater than any misfortune, greater than anything in this world. We can found our lives on faith, hope, and love. And so when Jesus recommends voluntary poverty to us, the lesson that I think he is offering us, is to live in this life without too much attachment, to work in this life without being attached to that work, to love in this life, to love everybody as if they were our own selves, but not to get attached too much to who we think we are, or who we think that they should be. Live, work, love, lead a good life, but found it all on the One who is greater than all of these things.