

May 31, 2009
Riverside Covenant Church
Daniel S. Teefey
Luke 12:16-21 – Bling, Bling

A few years ago a man from West Virginia won the Powerball lottery jackpot. His friends had always described him as a boisterous, generous and happy-go-lucky guy until he won the \$315 million prize. To most of us that would seem like such a blessing, but with money comes great temptations and complications. Whittaker's winnings were the richest undivided jackpot in U.S. history at the time. Although he quickly gave millions away to his church and other charities, his money eventually brought him problems and difficulties that he had never experienced before. He became a slave to his wealth and it led him down paths where he never thought he would find himself. Since winning the jackpot in 2002, Whittaker has been arrested twice for drunken driving and has been ordered into rehab. He eventually pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor assault charge for attacking a bar manager, and was accused in two lawsuits of causing trouble at a nightclub and a racetrack. His wife, understanding the effects that the money had on her husband, was quoted as saying, **"I wish all of this would have never happened, I wish I would have torn that ticket up."** The Whittakers have come to realize that money and material things do not bring happiness.

We have all seen examples of these types of things first hand. People who have reached the pinnacles of their careers or have made fortunes, yet they still feel an emptiness. Something in their life is missing. Their lives lack significance and purpose and they continue to wonder aimlessly looking for a home for their soul.

A couple years ago I was at a birthday party for a friend of Dana's. I really did not know too many people there so I found a couch by the TV where a group of guys were sitting. I started to talk with one guy in particular. He was a really bright guy who had always dreamed of being a lawyer. He had just graduated from Harvard Law School a couple of years earlier and was now working at a large law firm in downtown Chicago. He was getting married, had a brand new condominium in Chicago, and a new car. He was doing well in his job and thought that he could make partner in his law firm in three years. He claimed he had accomplished nearly all of his goals and realized all of his dreams. If there is an American dream this guy was living it.

BUT his story did not end there. As we talked some more, this guy conveyed to me that he was unhappy. All these things that he had amassed, all the goals that he had met, all the successes that he had had, did not satisfy his heart. He yearned for more. His heart desired something greater. Something more significant. He was searching for something that his Harvard education, his high profile job, and his new condo could not provide.

He told me that he was ready to leave his legal career and seek after something more fulfilling. . .

maybe a career in computer science he thought out loud. This guy was searching; he was looking for life in all its fullness, but he was looking in the wrong places. He was guided by the wrong priorities and was being led astray by falsehood and deception.

This morning we are going to look at a parable in which Jesus emphasizes the worthlessness of accumulating things for ourselves.

Read Luke 12:16-21.

If you look at the text immediately before this parable that Jesus tells, we see that **Jesus tells this parable in response to a question that he receives.** Someone in the crowd comes to Jesus and asks him to tell his brother to divide their inheritance. He addresses Jesus as teacher or rabbi.

In the Jewish world, rabbis or teachers were both religious leaders and lawyers. Since disputes were often over how the Old Testament laws should be interpreted, rabbis, as experts in the law, were asked to adjudicate disputes.

Old Testament inheritance laws said that the eldest son should receive a double portion, but it was encouraged that brothers live together without dividing their inheritance at all. There is clearly a dispute that has arisen with respect to the inheritance of the man before Jesus. He believes his brother is being unfair and wants Jesus to state that the law is on his side.

In Jesus fashion, he does not directly answer the question of who is right or wrong according to the law, but makes comments intended to pierce the motivations and the heart of the questioner. He immediately names greed as the man's motivation.

Jesus then tells him the parable we just read. A rich farmer produces a good crop and he thinks to himself, **“I have so much, I don’t have room for it all.”** So he decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to store all of his stuff. Then he says to himself, **“I am good to go. I will now take life easy, eat, drink and be merry.”**

Here is the kicker, if we are honest with ourselves all that sounds pretty good. Most of our lives are lived wanting to be like this guy. That might be the definition of what retirement is supposed to look like to us. We want to reach a day when we can say to ourselves, **“I have many good things (or a lot of cash) laid up for many years; eat, drink and party.”**

Jesus’ next words, though, then strike a tender nerve. Jesus says, **“But God said to him, “You fool!” This very night you will die and then who will get all that stuff you have accumulated.**

An often quoted psalm, Psalm 24 begins, **“The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”** Sounds nice, doesn’t it. If asked about creation, we would quickly respond that God created everything. **Intellectually we would likely even agree that everything in the world is ultimately God’s.** But practically, we live life much more possessively. That is mine. That is yours. Not only do we do this with our homes, our cars, and other personal possessions, but we can even do this in our churches. This is my space. This is your space.

There are some hard truths that we need to swallow though. We are greedy people. The dictionary says that **“greed” is “an excessive desire to acquire or possess more than what one needs.”** Jews understood greed as a mark of depravity and the origin of other sins. We are hesitant to give up space, time, money, whatever . . . because we always think we need more for ourselves. We have no understanding of our needs and live to satisfy out-of-control needs and desires. This is our nature. This comes natural to us as sinners.

Think about the fact that you have to teach children how to share. Sharing does not come naturally. If I were to go to the nursery right now and find Miriam, and then try to borrow whatever toy she was playing with . . . she would immediately reach for it back. No matter how many other toys she had to play

with it . . . the instincts are telling her that the toy is hers and that no one else should be able to use it. We must be taught to share. Even as adults we must learn to combat our greed.

So the first hard truth is that we are greedy. The second hard truth that we must understand is that we are rich, rich, rich. The West has 15 percent of the world's population but 90 percent of its wealth. While almost 1 billion people in the world don't get enough to eat each day, 62% of adults in the United States are overweight. Since the 1950's the size of homes in the United States has doubled while the average size of families has decreased. There are tons of statistics like these.

Now I don't tell you these things to make you feel guilty. My goal is to help us to see the enormous opportunity that we have if we can name our greed and then move away from it.

We are greedy and rich. But God has an alternative life for us. It starts with not just intellectually understanding that God created everything and that it is all his, but actually living our lives as if this were true. Now this is going to be a little scary . . . but all those titles that you keep in safe places . . . the title to your house, the title to your car . . . there is a misprint on them . . . you do not actually own your home or your car . . . they too are God's.

How does this change our way of living? How does our perspective change when we no longer think about all our assets, all the things that we own and that are ours . . . and start to think about how all of the things that we have are borrowed. The things that we have are on loan from God.

Too often in our materialistic culture we are lead to believe that we are entitled to our income, that we are entitled to our car, that we are entitled to favor from our authorities, that we are entitled to cut into the turn lane, etc. We are mislead into believing that we have worked the hardest, are without fault, are the busiest, and are the most deserving of whatever it is that we desire. We believe we are entitled to particular things because of our hard work.

Notice in verse 16 that Jesus is careful to point out that the man in the parable did not produce a good crop. Verse 16 says, "the ground . . . produced a good crop." The man's prosperity does not result from his own effort. The parable almost makes it as if the accumulation of wealth on the man's part was random. At the very least the man is distanced from the reason for his prosperity.

Everything that we receive is a gift from God. Our desire to work should not be for personal gain, but in order to use the gifts God has given us in the way that would most benefit his kingdom.

The eventual result of this would then be that when we do get something that we had hoped that we would, we do not see it as something we were entitled to, but something that is a gift from God. We would thus be less attached to it and more willing to pass it on to those who could benefit from receiving an example of God's compassion, love, and grace.

Do you understand the freedom this gives us? Without the sense of entitlement, we serve for the sake of serving. We love others for the sake of loving them. We are released from the burden of depending on certain results. For instance, if I choose to care for my neighbor because I know that caring for my neighbor is pleasing to God, then I could care less if my neighbor is seemingly ungrateful for my efforts. God is grateful and it is Him that I am trying to please. This is much more freeing than basing the success of my serving on a job that my neighbor may give me or on the personal gratification I would get from a neighbor's praise.

Knowing that everything is God's . . . what now do we do? Well, we follow God's example. God first generously gave to us and we should thus be willing to generously give.

To begin this journey, we must move towards simplicity. We must realize that our value as humans is not tied to wealth, status, accomplishments, or position. . . Our human value. . . what we are worth. . . is not at all dictated by the world, but was given to us as a gift when God created us in his image. We are not people rooted in the American economy, but people rooted in the book of Genesis. We must return to this fundamental Christian understanding of creation. We are not independent people all competing against each other for success. . . but people wholly dependent on God seeking to live in community. Simplicity is a journey from a false sense of independence and to a posture of dependence.

The seeking of simplicity and the true heart of God requires the asking of some tough questions of our lives. . . Is it possible to come to a place in our life where we do not desire a larger or nicer house even if we can afford it? Is it possible to come to a place where we don't care what people think of us when we walk into a room? Is it possible that all of the technology in our lives has made it more difficult to see

God? Is it possible that we do not have to own things to enjoy them? Is it possible that our desire for privacy and independence prevents us from interacting with the image of God in other people? Is it possible to decide on a particular economic level that we can live at and rest contented with that level, even if our income exceeds it considerably?

G.K. Chesterton said once, **“there are two ways to get enough: one is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.”** Through simplicity we learn to desire less. And what we find when we desire less. . . is that we are free. . . we are free to be exactly who we were created to be. . . we do not have to worry about others’ expectations or impressions of us. Be Thou My Vision, the song that the music team played as an instrumental to begin this morning, speaks to this truth. . . **“Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise. . . thou mine inheritance, now and always, thou and thou only first in my heart, high King of heaven, my treasure thou art.”**

Jesus concludes our passage by saying we should be **“rich towards God.”** To do this we must learn to properly manage what we have.

In his book the Freedom of Simplicity, Richard Foster gives us ten controlling principles for living a simple life that releases us from greed. Ten sounds like a lot, but I think that they are exceptionally significant and each of them are directly connected to our struggle to make God the center of our lives.

1) buy things for their usefulness rather than their status. . .

This is directly related to the question. . . who are we trying to impress? Do we read the bible and say, “I want to be her. . . or I want to be like him” or are we more likely to watch TV or a movie and say, “I want to be like them.” We should buy things that we need. . . things that are useful. . .not things because they will increase our worldly status or reputation.

2) reject anything that is producing an addiction in you. . .

Addictions are gods. Addictions are not just alcohol or cigarettes or sex either. Addictions can be those things that we just cannot say no too. I have told you many times that I can be addicted to the

internet or information at times. We must identify the addictions in our lives and flee from them. They steal our time, thoughts, and adoration from God.

3) develop a habit of giving things away. . .

One of the most affective ways of decreasing your desires or covetousness and greed is to give things away. If you have things in your life that you would not be willing to give away to someone in need, you may need to consider the importance that you have placed on that thing. By developing a habit of giving things away. . . not just money. . . but things that we use, we gradually break ourselves away from our attachment to those things. We begin to be set free.

I would encourage to get in the habit of giving your money to the ministry too. If you have never given to Riverside, maybe God is prompting you to begin to support His work here. I encourage you to give one dollar every week as a start. Or 5 dollars. The point is to start a habit. I would be excited to see if we had 50 \$1 donations every week from people beginning to practice giving things away.

4) refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry. . .

This is a particularly difficult one for most Americans. But believe it or not, we do not always need the new and improved version. Faster is not always better.

5) learn to enjoy things without owning them. . .

If we own something we feel like we can control it. . . and if we control it we are under the illusion that it will be better. So when it snows an inch, everyone on the block walks out with their snow blower and blows away the snow. . . then it sits in the garage for another few weeks. . . and then 9 months. What would happen if we bought one snow blower with our neighbors and shared. . . sure it would may be a little more difficult. . . but just like we tell our kids. . . it is better to share.

6) develop a deeper appreciation for the creation. . .

God created more than just us. The Psalms say, “the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” Learn to appreciate nature. Try to see God’s hand in everything that He created. As we develop this eye for true beauty, “things” will start to look like counterfeits.

7) look with a healthy skepticism at all “buy now, pay later” schemes. . .

Don’t be tricked into buying things before you can afford them.

8) obey Jesus’ instructions about plain, honest speech. . .

Don’t say things that you do not mean. . . and do not say more than is necessary. Make honesty and integrity the distinguishing characteristics of your speech.

9) reject anything that will breed the oppression of others. . .

I attended a symposium on Justice one time and one of the speakers there said, “Live simply. . . so that others may simply live.” Our extravagant living in the United States is not without a cost. It is often at the expense of workers who are underpaid and who do not have adequate benefits. Simplicity requires that we are conscientious about the products and services that we use. That we do not abuse others, directly or indirectly, for our personal gain.

10) shun whatever would distract you from your main goal. . .

Stay focused. In the complexity of life we often find ourselves scattered. . . and we may find ourselves doing things and we don’t know why. Reevaluate the things that you do each day. . . and ask yourself whether those things are consistent with who you are and who you want to be as a creature created in the image of God.

This list is daunting. When I first read it I was very convicted. The point of the list is not to foster guilt though. It is to prompt action. It is to call us to radical living that detaches us from the concerns of the world and sets us free to fully love God without greed.

Much is required from those to whom much is given, and much more is required from those to whom much more is given. I believe it is a gross misrepresentation of Scripture to presume that because we have been blessed with wealth (or earned wealth as many Americans prefer to think) that God would desire for us to spend that money on anything that we please.

Jesus points out the imminent nature of death to illustrate the foolishness of the accumulation of things on earth. He says that the rich farmer is going to die that very night and then who is going to get all that stuff he has hoarded. It certainly won't be him. Despite the man's best efforts, he has no control of life and death. Those who store things up for themselves will have nothing in death, but those who are rich towards God will have God's eternal blessings.

Jesus' primary point in this parable is focus. What is our focus? The focus on possessions for oneself leads to impoverishment with God. Possessions over and over, throughout Scripture are one of the chief obstacles to salvation and life with God. The fault is not in the possessions themselves but in how tightly we cling to them.

God wants us to meet our basic needs of food, clothing and shelter . . . but beyond that God expects us to be conscientious in how we manage our resources. I cannot tell you exactly what to do and what to give. Ultimately our giving is a matter between us and God. We are simply instructed to be generous to God and others with whatever we have.

We all have a variety of reasons for not giving more . . . but no matter how faithful we may be in other areas of our life . . . God wants to manage our money and resources as well. God's command is clear. Give generously and give cheerfully. God generously and cheerfully gave to us and we should do the same for God and His church.

References consulted:

Foster, Richard J. Freedom of Simplicity. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005.

Kistemaker, Simon J. The Parables. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980.

Snodgrass, Klyne R. Stories of Intent. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.