

MORE THAN WHAT YOU HAVE
LUKE 12:13-21
AUGUST 3, 1986

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I received a newsletter this week from a minister friend of mine. He currently is preaching a sermon series on "THINGS I WISH JESUS HADN'T SAID." This sermon is about one of those things we wish Jesus hadn't said. We think we would be very comfortable if Jesus had not brought up certain topics. But, on the other hand, when we ignore Jesus' difficult sayings, we ignore them to our own peril. Success, happiness, and fulfillment will elude us until we take Jesus' difficult sayings seriously.

The sermon this morning, based on the gospel lesson, is about your life. What is your life? What are you worth? How do you measure your value? I wonder how many of us immediately thought of money. When I asked your worth, did you think of monetary value? Our society has taught us to evaluate a person's life in terms of his/her net worth. Dr. Lee Salk, a professor of psychology at the New York Hospital Cornell Medical Center, said, "People jockey to find out what other people earn because, in our society, money is a symbol of strength, influence and power." Jesus had some strong views on the subject, essentially saying: You are more than what you have.

In Luke 12:15, Jesus said, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." That quote is from the Revised Standard Version. The Good News translation reads, "Watch out, and guard yourselves from every kind of greed; because a person's true life is not made up of the things he owns, no matter how rich he may be." You are more than what you have, more than what you own or possess, more than the things you have; but, we get mixed up. Somehow we get our values twisted. We put too much emphasis on things, and end up being possessed by our possessions. Jesus warns us about covetousness, about greed.

Paul also warns us. In the Epistle lesson this morning, Colossians 3:5-6, Paul wrote, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:...covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these, the wrath of God is coming." What is so wrong about covetousness, or greed? What is so bad about owning things? What is so bad about being rich? Everyone in this place this morning is wealthy. How many of you own television sets? How many of you own your own homes, or are in the process of owning your own home? You are wealthier than 95% of all the people on this earth. Is that bad? Is that wrong? What is wrong with having money?

Jesus talked a great deal about money; in fact, Jesus talked more about money and possessions than any other topic! And Jesus didn't talk about money so that he could raise more. Jesus didn't take offerings. He was not in the business of conducting finance campaigns. He didn't raise money for churches, United Ways, scholarship funds, or alumni associations. Jesus wasn't trying to manipulate contributions by making people feel guilty about their wealth. Jesus was concerned about people. Jesus had observed the effect money has on people.

In our lesson today, Jesus told a parable about the rich farmer who had such a bumper crop that he ran out of storage space. So he said to himself, "I'll tear down my barns and build bigger. Then I will certainly have enough stockpiled so that I can take life easy. I'll eat, drink and generally enjoy myself." But, Jesus considered the man to be poor, rather than rich. Jesus

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called him a fool, for he found the farmer a man to be pitied, rather than a man to be admired. Why? Because a man's life is more than what he has. What he has can be taken away in a flash, especially by death. A person's life is not made up of things! Jesus concluded that there is a vast difference between piling up riches for yourself and being rich in God's sight.

A man of substance was asked to contribute to a major financial campaign. The urgent need and compelling case were stated and the call was made for his support. He was asked to give \$50,000. The man responded, "I understand why you think I can give \$50,000, but there are some things you don't know. Did you know that my mother is in an expensive nursing home?" Well, no, they didn't know. "Did you know also that my brother died, and left a family of five and had almost no insurance?" No, they didn't know that either. "Did you know my son is deeply religious, has gone into social work, and makes less than the national poverty level to meet the needs of his family?" No, they hadn't realized. "Well, then," he went on, "as I don't give any of them a penny, why do you think I'll give to you?"

According to the most recent studies I have read, the number one problem in marriages that eventually fail is money. When the preoccupation with money gets out of hand, or when money is mismanaged, tragedy results. An advertisement for a finance company read, "Now You Can Borrow Enough Money to Get Completely Out of Debt." People fall for that doubletalk. Did you read this week that one of our high government officials said that poverty among American blacks has risen but they are better off! We actually pay people to dream up nonsense like that!

Why does money cause trouble? What is the danger in accumulating things? Richard J. Foster, in his book, Money, Sex and Power, writes: (pgs. 24-26)

Money is not just a neutral medium of exchange but a "power" with a life of its own. And very often it is a "power" that is demonic in character...When Jesus uses the Aramaic term "mammon" to refer to wealth, he is giving it a personal and spiritual character. When he declares, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24), he is personifying mammon as a rival god. In saying this, Jesus is making it unmistakably clear that money is not some impersonal medium of exchange. Money is not something that is morally neutral, a resource to be used in good or bad ways depending solely upon our attitude toward it. Mammon is a power that seeks to dominate us...Money is an active agent; it is a law unto itself; and it is capable of inspiring devotion.

Therefore, the danger of accumulating things is that the things might take control of us. There is something inherently possessive about possessions. They subvert and sabotage. They insidiously get us to serve them. Things become our masters. Money becomes our god--a god that demands worship, a hungry god whose appetite is insatiable, incapable of being satisfied, always demanding more and more. That popular author named Anonymous wrote, "A man with six children is better satisfied than a man with a million dollars. The man with a million dollars wants more." Anonymous is the one who also said, "The more things I own, the more they own me." John Steinbeck observed, upon his return from a trip to Europe, that America is like a spoiled child on Christmas morning, who sits amid the great pile of toys and presents, and

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looks up and says, "Is that all?" The danger of accumulating things is that money has a power all its own that seeks to control, dominate and eventually destroy people.

However, this is not the Bible's last word on money. The Bible warns us about money, but it also teaches us that money can enhance our relationship with God and be a means of serving humankind. Jesus was not against money. He did not encourage us to deny wealth or deprive ourselves. The woman who anointed Jesus was praised, even though she was accused by Judas of being extravagant. The good Samaritan evidently had money and his use of money to help the wounded traveler was praised by Jesus. Jesus ate with the rich as well as with the poor. He joined in the lavish wedding feast at Cana and added to the wine supply when they ran out. Both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were wealthy. Material things are not to be despised or denied or relegated to a lowly position outside the parameters of a healthy, vital relationship with God.

The question for us is not what is bad about wealth, but why are you wealthy? Why has God made us rich? Your things, your money, your wealth are gifts from God, entrusted to you and to your care for the doing of God's work. You are the managers of God's investments. Giving away all that you have is not necessarily the best way to help the poor. Over a period of time, proper management and the wise use of resources can be far more effective. Look upon your good life, not as a reward because you are so good or so smart, but as a privilege and an opportunity to help others and do God's ministry. Not only that, but you can be comfortable in the process. There is nothing wrong with being comfortable; in fact, you will be a more effective manager when you are comfortable and can devote yourself wholeheartedly to the task of management.

The danger is the temptation to forget that the money we are managing is for God's work. The temptation is to mix up our priorities so that our comfort and our well-being take precedence over God's work. The temptation is to keep too much of the money for ourselves, far more than what we really need. Do any of us really need all the things we have accumulated? The irony of our affluent culture is that we are running out of space for garbage dumps. We don't know where to store or discard our junk. Be thankful for rummage sales!

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, summarized the biblical attitude towards money, "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can." The biblical standard is 10% for God's work. Out of all you have been given, you may keep 90% for yourself and the government! If your spiritual vitality seems low, if you are concerned about the power money has over you, if you worry a great deal about your financial future, if you wish you were happier, if you desire a closer walk with God, then examine your performance! Perhaps you are not fulfilling your part of the management agreement with God, the covenant with God. Maybe you are being stingy and greedy, trying to fill up too many barns, and then wonder why your spiritual diet is so meager!

You are more than what you have; don't sell your life out to money or things. Beware of covetousness. Renounce ownership of all that you have; let Christ be the owner and you be the manager. When it is time to let things go, let them go. They are not yours. What you have comes and goes. Give thanks

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when it comes; give thanks when it goes. And when it is time for you to leave this earth, leave a will that devotes part of your resources to the doing of God's work even after you are gone.

Let Jesus Christ be the owner of all that you are and have. Foster says it well in his book, Money, Sex and Power, (pg. 71) "We have only one desire: to obey Christ in all things. We have only one purpose: to glorify Christ in all things. We have only one use for money: to advance his kingdom upon the earth." You are more than what you have. You are a child of God, created by God, loved by God, saved by the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ, called by Christ and commissioned by Christ to be a manager of all that you have so that God's work might be accomplished.