

## Building Barns, Postponing Life

Luke 12:13-21

Jack Benny had a skit which illustrated how we place money ahead of everything. He is walking down the street when suddenly he is approached by an armed robber, "Your money or your life!" There is a long pause. Jack does nothing. The robber impatiently queried, "Well?" Jack replied, "Don't rush me, I'm thinking it over."

This morning I would like us to think a few moments about our money and our life. Let's see what Jesus has to say about these two subjects.

The background for our story is an incident that occurred in Galilee as Jesus was teaching to a large crowd. A young man called out from the crowd and said: "Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the inheritance of our father." Now, Jewish law clearly prescribed that at the death of a father, the elder son received 2/3 of the inheritance, and the young son received 1/3. This is obviously a younger son who is complaining about the inherent unfairness of it all. Nothing will divide brothers and sisters more than dividing up an estate. So it was then, and so it is now. Jesus refused to get involved in a petty family squabble.

Jesus was concerned, however, with the larger implications of preoccupation with the things of this world. He said: Beware of greed, for life does not consist of things possessed. The sum total of a person's life is more than their financial portfolio.

He then illustrated this point by telling a story. There was once a man who had an unbroken run of prosperity. In today's language, he had successfully played the commodities market. So prosperous did he become that his barns could not hold all of his crops. His solution was to tear down these barns and build bigger and better barns.

Then, with his financial security in hand, he could sit back and truly enjoy life. His philosophy was: eat, drink, and be merry. And Jesus ends by saying that this man was a fool.

The issue before us this morning is then: what did this man do wrong? And the answer is that this is not a parable about money but about values and the important things in life. There are four things this guy did that made him a fool.

**First, he was a fool because he had full barns, but an empty heart.** He was rich in man's eyes but poor in God's. It's fine to make investments, as long as we understand that the best investment that we can make is in the Kingdom of God and that the only future that is sure is God's future.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a story about a successful peasant farmer who was not satisfied with his lot. He wanted more of everything. Here's how Tolstoy tells the story: One day a farmer received a novel offer. For 1000 rubles, he could buy all the land he could walk around in a day. The only catch in the deal was that he had to be back at his starting point by sundown.

Early the next morning he started out walking at a fast pace. By midday he was very tired, but he kept going, covering more and more ground. Well into the afternoon he realized that his greed had taken him far from the starting point. He quickened his pace and as the sun began to sink low in the sky, he began to run, knowing that if he didn't make it back by sundown the opportunity to become an even bigger landholder would be lost.

As the sun sank below the horizon he came within sight of the finish line. Gasping for breath, his heart pounding, he called upon every bit of strength left in his body and staggered across the line just before the sun disappeared. He immediately collapsed and

died a few minutes later. The title of Tolstoy's story was: How Much Land Does a Man Need?

Jesus, like Tolstoy, is warning us that we'd better not put our trust in the promise of materialism; if we do we'll be sadly disappointed. The man in the parable was a fool because he banked on full barns. The people of God might better store our money in the stomachs of the hungry, the minds of the uneducated, the bodies of the sick, the spirits of the oppressed, and the spread of the Gospel. Then we shall be rich in God's eyes.

**Secondly this man was a fool because he overestimated his own value in the scheme of things.** Listen to how he talked: *I will store my grain, I will build bigger barns, I will say to myself.* He didn't see others as the source of his bounty, or even God, only himself. His error was not that he was a wealthy man but rather his superficiality and egotism.

I once read where a PhD in agriculture said that by his estimate nature provides 95% of the energies necessary to produce a crop, while the farmer provides 5%. Yet, in Jesus' story this narcissistic farmer is using the words I and mine as though he is the only one involved.

In the movie *Shenandoah*, James Stewart plays a Virginia farmer during the Civil War. He begins every meal with the same prayer: "Lord, I planted the seeds, I plowed the ground, I gathered in the harvest. If I hadn't of put the food on the table it wouldn't be here. But we thank you anyway." We'd all be wise to understand the role of grace and mystery in life or we, too, might fall pray to the sin of thinking too highly of ourselves.

**Third, this man was a fool because he forgot what his real business in life was all about.** This man thought that his business was about commodities and markets. Jesus thought in deeper terms.

It's a bit out of season to talk about Dickens's novel "A Christmas Carol," but one scene particularly sticks out in my mind. Jacob Marley, Scrooge's deceased business partner, visits him in a ghostly appearance one evening. Marley is chained with large books and ledgers. "These are the links that I forged in life", he says. This puzzles Scrooge and he protests: "But these were the things of your business". Marley groans back: "Business. Mankind was my business. The common good was my business."

Jesus is suggesting to us that our business in life goes far beyond tally sheets, investments, and tax forms. Our real business is that of our humanity. It gets down to the tension between becoming and being. We spend so much of our time concentrating on what we're becoming, and lose sight of what we are being.

Several years ago (1991) there was a movie called "The Doctor." It starred John Hurt who played the role of a very businesslike, rather glib surgeon, who had absolutely no rapport with his patients. One day he has in his office a Hispanic farmer and his family. He has run some tests on the man and he is seriously ill. He matter-of-factly suggests to him: sir, if I were you, I would get my affairs in order. At that the farmer places one arm around his wife, and the other arm around his children, and he says very simply, but very profoundly: Sir, my affairs are in order.

What's our business in life? It's not so much to be successful as it is to be faithful. It's not so much to amass things, but to grow closer to the mind of God. It's not so much to become rich in things, but to love people. That's our business. But a fool will never grasp it.

**Lastly, this man was a fool because he forgot about time.** His whole attitude in life was that time was unlimited.

I confess to you that I have a bias against digital watches and clocks. I fear that we're raising an entire generation of people who do not know how to tell time. If you say that it is 7 till 10, a large group of people don't have the slightest idea what I'm talking about. To them it's 9:53 because that's what's on their digital watch.

So why do I think this is a problem and why do I have a bias with it? Simply this. I think time should have a sweep to it. If we learn to see time as 9:53, then we see time only in the context of the immediate moment, and not in the larger context of time. And I think it's absolutely lethal for Christians to see time only as "right now." That's how the world sees time. Christians should see time as moving toward something.

How many people do you know who have spent all of their life preparing to live? It's good to save our money for a rainy day, but it's perilous to save our life for a rainy day. Because time might just run out on us.

You see, the clock is relentless. It beats us down. It's always ticking. Regardless of what we do or fail to do, the clock keeps ticking. It's a fool that says: "Heaven can always wait. It is a fool who builds barns, but postpones life".

And I pray you're not a fool.