

SMALLER BARNS, DEEPER JOY

SERIES: THE PARABLES OF JESUS



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Luke 12:13-21
Fourth Message
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Luke 12:13-21

Along with this morning's host, Bruce, and most of our pastoral team, I spent the week in Vancouver for a class at Regent College. The class that we took was from a scholar named John Walton. John has had a big impact on my understanding of Scripture over the last 10-12 years, and it was an absolute joy to learn from him for five days. The class was on Old Testament hermeneutics, which is the methodology we use to study the Old Testament. I really enjoyed the class and the discussion that flowed from it. And I also came away feeling incredibly grateful for this church, our commitment to God's word, and our desire to understand it deeply and apply it wisely. I am also grateful to our elders who are willing and eager to send us pastors away to study together for a week so that we might come back and apply that knowledge here as we pursue God together.

So, happy Sunday. Thanks for being here. I am excited to see what the Lord has for us today.

This morning, we are continuing our summer series on the parables of Jesus. We will be in Luke 12:13-21, which contains a parable often referred to as the "parable of the rich fool." In short, the parable goes like this: There was a rich man who owned some land. That land produced a large crop. The crop was so large that it would not fit in his existing barns, so he tore his barns down, built bigger ones, and retired early. Then God shows up and calls him a fool and tells him that he is going to die that night.

Yesterday afternoon, our family spent almost two hours at our house doing Lego deconstruction. This is our routine every couple of months. As the boys build their Lego creations, they inevitably want to keep them up to play with them for a while. Eventually, we have no more space to put Lego creations, so we go through the tedious work of taking them apart, sorting them by color, and putting them away in their appropriate bins. Apparently, we have acquired more Legos since the last time we did this because about halfway through this process, it became clear that the Legos would not all fit in the bins we had. What was our solution? Buy more bins!

What a normal, natural solution. Buy more bins. Build bigger barns. There is nothing that seems more obvious than this.

Did you know that America has an estimated 2,099,000,000 sq. ft. of storage unit space today? That is 6.32 sq. ft. of storage space per person in this country. If these storage units were empty, every person in America could lie down side by side in a storage unit and we would not run out of space. It might be unpleasant, but we could do it.

Why do we have so much storage space? Largely because we didn't have enough room in our houses for our stuff, so we needed to build bigger barns.

The man in our story had so much wealth that he needed to build bigger barns to store it all. And God shows up and calls him a fool. These are harsh words from the mouth of Jesus.

I like this parable a lot. I like this parable because it's so relatable. I think there are many people in Silicon Valley whose goal in life is to be like this guy. Hit it big. Make your millions. Sit back and relax. You see, there's a part of me that wants that. Now, you may think, Dan, you picked the wrong career. Fair enough. I am not likely to hit it big as a pastor. But a part of me thinks that would be pretty great. And I bet a part of you thinks that would be pretty great. And I bet some of you here live that life and think, Yeah, this is pretty great.

Is that bad? Well, this parable forces us to ask that question.

So often, I think our default when we are faced with harsh words from the mouth of Jesus is to think about other people and how they need to hear these words. But today, I want to invite you to be open to the possibility that these words are for you. That maybe there is a little bit of a rich fool inside of you. Being rich doesn't make you a fool any more than being poor makes you wise. And yet the point of this parable is to pause and ask: Am I like the rich fool?

This morning, I am not asking for your money. Giving is important, and giving to the church is important, but that is not what this parable or this sermon is about. This parable is about your heart. So, I want to give us a moment to open our hearts to God in prayer. I want to give you a moment right here as we get started to open your heart to God and pray that he will show you what's in your heart. Because he knows and wants you to know so that he can be with you in the deepest part of you.

Let me give us a moment to open our hearts to God.

Searching for happiness... and coming up short

Luke 12:13-21:

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”¹⁴ But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?”¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully,¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

At this point in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He has spent the early part of his ministry mainly in the north, in Galilee. But in chapter 9, Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem, where he knows that he will give up his life.

On the way, he begins to articulate the call to discipleship even more clearly. He wants people to understand what it will cost them to follow after him and the incredible benefits of doing so.

Now, in chapter 12, Jesus is surrounded by thousands of people, but one man breaks through the crowd and makes his way to Jesus. This man is the younger brother

of a family where the father has passed away and the family estate has been passed on to the oldest brother to manage. The law of Moses indicates that the oldest son should receive a double portion of the inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). We are not given enough information, in this case, to know exactly what is going on, but it seems that either the oldest brother has refused to give the younger brother the portion that was due to him, or the younger brother is not satisfied with the portion that he is given. Whatever the specific situation, the younger brother comes to Jesus frustrated, asking him—no, demanding him—to serve as an arbitrator. But Jesus sees through the request to the man’s heart, which was full of greed. Rather than serve as an arbitrator in this family dispute, Jesus uses this as a teaching opportunity.

Luke 12:15:

And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

In this response, Jesus offers both a warning and a deep insight into the reality of life. His warning: Watch out! Guard yourself against every form of greed.

Greed, or covetousness (as the ESV translates it here), is that sneaky little desire to have just a bit more. It is that sense that your life would be better if you just had this or that. It is that sometimes overt but more often subtle sense that we would be happy—that we would be content—if we just had what *they* have.

Against that subtle sense, Jesus goes right to the heart of the issue and, with pinpoint accuracy, calls out the lie that motivated this man’s greed—and so often motivates ours as well. That lie is that our life—our success, our satisfaction, our ability to find happiness or live a fulfilled life—comes down to our net worth, the house we live in, the car we drive, or the things we accumulate.

One summer, when I was in college, I had a job supervising a landscaping crew of underprivileged youth. At one point, we were repairing an eroded portion of a trail at a county park. We had been up and down the trail all day, hauling wheelbarrows of gravel up and down this hill. At the end of the day, one of the workers, a high school student from a family without many resources, realized that he had lost his iPod—back when iPods were cutting-edge technology. He had it in his pocket, but somewhere along the way, it had fallen out. A few of us helped him walk the trail and look around, but

the iPod couldn't be found—a big loss for a kid without much extra money.

The next day, this kid shows up to work with an iPod. “Oh, did you find your iPod last night?” I asked him. “No,” he said. “I bought a new one.” It probably cost him a week's worth of work at minimum wage—hard work, sweating out under the hot sun. I looked at him with surprise and said, “Really?” “Yeah,” he said. “I know this is kind of weird, but I am just one of those people who likes to have nice things.”

“Just one of those people who likes to have nice things.” Is that weird? I don't think so. I think that's pretty normal. I believe that most of us here probably like to have nice things. And there is not necessarily anything wrong with liking nice things, wanting nice things or even buying nice things. But here is the problem with liking nice things: We think these nice things will make us happy. But they don't do they

Maybe, at first, they do. Do you remember your first iPod (or smartphone for those who have never owned an iPod)? It probably made you happy for a while. But eventually, the excitement fades. Or a new version comes out. Or your friend gets the nicer model. And now your nice thing fails to deliver the joy it promised.

It is so easy for this to happen. It is so easy to think that one's life consists of the abundance of one's possessions. We maybe wouldn't put it in those terms. But then we lose our iPod and realize that we can't go 24 hours without buying a new one because we feel empty without it. Have you been there?

Jesus' instruction to this young brother—every bit as relevant to us today as it was to him—is to take care and be on our guard against all forms of greed. The image here is of a sentinel, a watchman. Greed is a sneaky kind of thing. If we struggle with anger, we are probably aware of it, or at least, the people around us are aware of it. If we struggle with lust, we are probably aware of it. If we are workaholics, we are probably aware of it. But greed is different. It's more subtle. It sneaks into our lives and claims hold of our hearts without realizing it.

And so Jesus says, Beware! Be watchful. Be on guard for how greed might sneak into our lives and lay hold of our hearts.

Then, he tells a story—a parable—to help us recognize the dangers of greed in our lives.

Building bigger barns

I want to reread this parable and break it down for us as we go.

Let's look together at verses 16-19 again.

Luke 12:16-19:

And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully,¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

What are we supposed to think about this man?

Well, we know he is rich. He probably inherited his wealth in the form of land. People in that day didn't get rich when their startup IPO'ed (Initial Public Offering). They didn't start companies or serve as angel investors. They were usually born into wealthy families, and that wealth was passed through the generations. So we don't know how this man became wealthy, but we know he didn't squander it. He seems to have managed it so well that he had to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to store all of his produce.

This guy knew what he was doing. He was a good businessman.

After this particularly good harvest, he realizes he has enough stored up for many years, so he retires early. Today, we call this FIRE—Financial Independence Retire Early. This guy was fire. He has enough stored up that he can kick back and relax without a worry in the world.

This is what so many people in our world are after. This might be what you are after. But, as we keep reading, we see that God did not think that this guy was a role model.

Luke 12:20:

But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

When God shows up at our front door to call you a fool, you know you have made poor life choices. But what did this guy do that was really so bad? I mean, this is what so many of us are after. Where exactly did he go wrong?

As we look at the parable, we see that this man's folly is found more in what he didn't do than what he did do.

First, he didn't stop to thank God. Farming is an interesting trade. There are good seasons, and there are bad seasons, and you, as the farmer, have very little control over which is which. The weather determines the crop. This year was a banger year. Everything went just right. God caused this man's crops to thrive. And yet he never pauses to thank God for his bountiful harvest. He doesn't even acknowledge God in the process. He didn't thank God. And he is called a fool.

This man didn't thank God, and he also didn't consider the needs of others. There were undoubtedly people around this man who were in great financial need. That is also true in our world, but poverty operated on a different level in first-century Israel. There would have been people all around this man who struggled to obtain the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. But this man seems completely unmoved by this. Rather than using his surplus to help those around him, he only asks the "I" question: What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? I know! I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones so I can enjoy the fruit of my labor.

He is totally self-absorbed and makes no effort to use his wealth to help those who are suffering.

But, there is another element that Jesus calls out in his rebuke of this man. He says, You are going to die tonight, and you can't take your big barns with you. This man was being short-sighted. The way that he was living his life and the way that he was managing his money failed to account for the fact that his time on this earth was limited. That one day, he would die; he would leave this world and enter the next, and all of his stuff would stay behind. He failed to account for his own mortality, and for this, he is called a fool.

And with this, the parable ends.

Being Rich Toward God

Often, parables lead toward a punch line—a one-liner that follows the parable itself and carries the main message of the parable. That is exactly what we find here,

and the punch line comes in v. 21 (Luke 12:21):

21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Foolish is the person, Jesus says, who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. This is the message of the parable. This is what Jesus wanted that younger brother to know, who was all bent out of shape about his inheritance. This is what the message that Jesus had for his disciples and the crowds as he turned to teach them. And this is the message that Jesus has for us today. Foolish is the person who lays up treasure for themselves and is not rich toward God.

This echoes Jesus' well-known words in the sermon on the Mount, to not store up treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but instead to store up treasure in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal.

Sometimes, we read this as a lesson about delayed gratification—giving up the good things that money can buy now to have even better things when we get to heaven. But this is not a lesson about delayed gratification. This is a message about living in the kingdom of God here and now. This is a message about aligning our lives with the very life of God so that we can experience his best for us—not just after we die, but right here and right now.

How many of us have bought into the lie that happiness comes from acquiring wealth in this life? How many of us are tempted to think we would be happy if we just had a little bit more? I think we've all been there at varying times and to varying degrees. In some ways, nothing is more natural than thinking that more money and more stuff leads to more happiness. And so we lay up treasure for ourselves on our quest for self-fulfillment.

The ironic thing—and the reason that Jesus calls that line of thinking foolish—is that true and lasting happiness can never be found in the things of this world. In fact, the drive to accumulate wealth and possessions often times gets in the way of our happiness.

Christians are not the only ones who recognize this. In his poem called "Fear and Fridays," country artist Zach Bryan says it this way.

I have learned that every waking moment is enough and that excess never leads to better things. It only piles

and piles atop the things that are already abundantly in front of you.

Excess never leads to better things. It only piles atop the things that are already abundantly in front of you. Though he is not a follower of Jesus as far as I know, Zach Bryan understands something that the rich fool totally missed: Life is not found in the abundance of one's possessions. And if we just stopped to enjoy the things in front of us—a conversation with a friend, a cool walk on a crisp morning, a kiss from the one we love—we would realize that we already have more than enough to be happy.

When Jesus says that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35), he is not giving a command: Give away your money! No, he is revealing to us the true nature of life. He is helping us understand how life really works. Even though we tend to think that we will have more joy when we get things, it turns out that we actually have more joy when we give our things away. It's counterintuitive, but it's true.

So Jesus' message for us today is again found in Luke 12:21: Foolish is the person who lays up treasure for themselves and is not rich toward God.

So, let me ask you two questions as we wrap up this morning:

Are you laying up treasure for yourself?

Notice that I did not ask if you are saving money, preparing for retirement, or even buying nice things. Jesus is not suggesting that we should not save or should not prepare for retirement. That would not be wise, and this passage is all about how to be wise with our money. However, Jesus is saying that we need to be thoughtful about how and why we are saving money. Are we saving money because we think that money is going to make us happy? If so, we are fools. And are we saving money for ourselves for some potential future need while neglecting the need of those around us? That is what Jesus is warning against when he warns us not to lay up treasure for ourselves.

So let me ask you again: Are you laying up treasure for yourself?

If so, could you open up that place in your heart? Could you also surrender that part of you to God and trust his wisdom?

The second question I want to ask is: Are you rich toward God?

Are you investing in the kingdom of God? In your relationship with God? Are you seeking his kingdom first? Are you using your resources, including but not limited to your financial resources, to be a blessing to others and to advance the kingdom of God?

Jesus is inviting us into a life that is rich toward God.

This morning, could you open your heart to God and receive the riches of a life lived in full devotion to God?

Conclusion

So next time your metaphorical barns fill up—whether that be your Lego bins, your kitchen cabinets, the parking spots at your house or whatever it might be for you—would you use that as an opportunity to ask God and to ask yourself whether you need to tear down your barns and built bigger ones or whether God is inviting your into a richer and deeper life in him — with smaller barns and deeper joy.