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What's Rich Towards God?

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(adapted from Pastor Keith)

In today's Gospel, Jesus delves into the issue that comes up fairly often in the book of Luke: That is, how do we handle our possessions.

Persons that suffer from OCHD, or Obsessive Compulsive Hoarding Disorder, collect all types of things, including the most mundane items like newspapers, and can never get rid of them. Some of the items did have some value, like old coins. Sometime the hoarding accumulates until the person adds on to the dwelling to be able to store their ever-growing amount of stuff. The home slowly becomes one big storage facility with small passageways between boxes and piles of bags, making rooms into mini-storage rooms instead of places to live. After their passing, family members spend many months going through the boxes, trying to figure out what to do with all of it.

This may seem like an extreme example of someone who has become possessed by his or her possessions. But when Jesus is asked to settle an estate dispute, he understood how easy it is to fall into the trap of letting possessions run one's life. This person is obviously embroiled in a family feud over an inheritance and needs a religious authority like Jesus to make a judgment against his brother. Jesus refuses to hear the case, but gets at the deeper issue at stake in the dispute: Greed, especially when it has to deal with the abundance of possessions. Jesus knows how seductive material goods can become. Jesus warns about the way "things" can take over our lives, even become our lives.

Jesus then tells what has become known as the Parable of the Rich Fool. As the owner of a large farm with his barns already bursting to overflowing, a rich man harvests a bumper crop with no place to store it. Desiring to keep the bounty for himself, and not being one to concern himself with the issue of waste, he plans to tear down the old barns and build himself bigger ones. He will store up his bounty and enjoy the excess, toasting his glass to his fat barns that he has filled.

"What is so wrong with storing the overrun of crops?" Frugal people have stashed excess food, saved for that rainy day, and hid cash in mattresses for future hardship. Joseph advised Pharaoh in Genesis to store up extra during the plentiful years so that when the lean years came, there would be enough. The Bible is full of

stories of celebrating the harvest and rejoicing at the signs of good fortune.

The problem in the parable isn't the issue of saving for the future or the issue of celebrating the good gifts of God. Saving for the future is part of good stewardship of what God has given. But appropriate concern for the future is balanced with the injunction to give glory to God and to care for one's neighbors. The man in the parable demonstrates neither of these other aspects of stewardship. There is no returning to God nor care for neighbor. He is just too concerned about himself. He has forgotten about the God who caused the bounty in the first place and the neighbor who does not have access to the bounty.

The rich man is concerned only for himself. There is no concern for or thanks to God who provided this bounty. Nor is there trust in God to provide continuously what is needed. Nor is there any concern for those who have no access to land to produce their own crops, no concern for the alien, no concern for the widow, and no concern for the orphan or others on the outskirts of society. The book of Luke is concerned with giving to the poor, which is an important aspect of the life of a disciple. But this rich man cannot see beyond his harvest, his barns, and his own life.

Even though proper stewardship of what has been given by God is the main issue at hand with the rich man, there are two other important aspects that are closely tied to that stewardship. First, God is the author of life and death as well as the creator of the land that produced the overflowing of crops. In the biblical era, it was understood it was God who made for a plentiful harvest, or a non-plentiful one for that matter. This man focuses only on the benefit accruing to him and totally ignores the hand of God in his good fortunes. Nowhere does he give thanks to God for what he has been given.

The other issue at hand is this man has forgotten that his own life is bound by death. Death will separate him from his overflowing barns. There are no storage facilities in heaven. Filling his barns to the brim did not extend his life one day. If anything, the added time and stress needed to manage the extra possessions has shortened his life.

Friends, Jesus isn't saying possessions and wealth in and of themselves are bad things or a sin. It is when pursuing possessions takes over our lives that it becomes sinful. This man has fallen into the trap of idolatry; he has let his possessions become his god, and his faith now lies in his ability and drive to get more. The constant message from the media is that life does consist in the abundance of

possessions. We are encouraged to make more so we can spend more, have more, and use more. Build a bigger home! Buy another car! Supersize it! Our culture pushes us to buy more things that we do not need, it champions a way of life that this parable characterizes as folly.

This man was rich unto himself. It can be said that the farmer filled his barn with Self. His goal in life was centered on acquiring more and more possession for his own use and benefit. But Christ in telling this parable is calling us to be rich toward God. What does that mean? What does being rich toward God look like? First it is realizing and living into the reality that all we have, including our own lives, is a gift from God. They are not our own. We should work hard, but realize what we are given is a gift and not a reward. Our wealth and possessions are a means and not an end. They are to be used to pursue God's Kingdom and reach out to those who do not have the resources to provide for themselves. Our lives no longer become defined by our possessions, but by the use of our whole lives to glorify God and help our neighbor.

Being rich toward God means living every aspect of our lives as though we are totally dependent on God. God matters in the practical aspects of our lives, not just on Sunday morning. What we give, what we buy, how we save and what we save for matters to God. Our credit card and bank statements are as much a statement of our faith as the Apostle's Creed.

Being rich toward God means giving glory and thanks to the God who gave us all that we have and need. All that we have, all that we are, all that we will become is because of God's love and grace toward us. Let us give thanks and celebrate that fact.

May we all be remembered for that kind of richness toward God and each other.

To God be the glory for the great things He has done. Amen. Amen. Amen.