

Life Giving Lessons: Luke 12:13-21  
How much is enough, if you can't take it with you?  
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## The Parable of the Rich Fool

<sup>13</sup>Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

<sup>14</sup>Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" <sup>15</sup>Then he said to them, **"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."**

<sup>16</sup>And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. <sup>17</sup>He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

<sup>18</sup>"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. <sup>19</sup>And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

<sup>20</sup>"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

<sup>21</sup>"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

[PRAY]

If your house was burning, what would you grab on your way out the door? (Turn and tell the person next to you!)

That question intrigued photographer Foster Huntington, so he gathered his must-save belongings and took a picture. Then he asked a few friends to think about that question and photograph their must-save belongings. The burning-house question raised an issue that people wanted to both answer and discuss.

In May of 2011 Huntington launched a website with photos of personal items that people would grab on their way out the door. Within a year, Huntington received thousands of photos from around the world that captured people's answer to the burning-house question.

Here are a few of the items people said they'd grab if their house caught on fire:

- One husband, one son, and three cats
- The film *The Princess Bride* on Blu-ray
- My daughter—everything else can be replaced
- A few packs of favorite green tea in case I'm thirsty
- Favorite earrings I wore to my wedding
- Ring I got from my Dad when I was 12
- Mystery Box (my father put something inside before I nailed it shut, forever closed until I am an old man and he is long gone)
- My grandfather's Bible
- Ernest Hemingway's selected letters
- iPhone 4
- Wallet
- Purse
- Very old teddy bear of my childhood
- Personal journal which contains all of my thoughts and ideas
- House key, because I need it, even though my house is burning
- My globe to always remind me of all the places I dream of seeing
- flip flops, a bathing suit and a skirt (because if my house burns down, I'm going to the beach)

Huntington says that this project has taught him a valuable lesson about material possessions. The question forces people to think about what they want versus what they really need. For instance, Huntington's first photo included 18 must-have items. But after thinking about the question for over a year, his list dropped to only two absolutely, irreplaceable items.

Jesus tells this particular parable in response to a request from a man for Jesus to arbitrate a dispute over an inheritance. Sadly, all of us have no doubt observed families, torn apart over similar divisions—bickering over money or possessions. It can get ugly. But Jesus refuses to get roped into this drama.

Instead, Jesus issues a warning and then tells a story...

The warning is this: **“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”**

**“All kinds of greed” is in Greek, translated “grasping ambition”.**

Greed is more than a lack of contentment with what God has provided. This type of greed might better be understood as avarice.

Chaucer defines avarice as “keeping and withholding such things as one has, when there is no need to do so.” Avarice is the clenched fist sort of greed, the one that holds on, and holds back.

One wonders what feeds this desire? I think perhaps it is fear...fear of not having enough. Fear--that even if I have bread today, it will be gone tomorrow, and then what shall I do? Where will food come from? Perhaps this is why Jesus taught us to pray: “Give us today the bread we need!”

**Fear may indeed be the motivation for greed or hoarding.** Fear of scarcity—of lacking enough to meet one’s basic needs—may in fact be the motivation for hoarding or greed. For those who grew up during the Depression, or who have experienced a period of deprivation may indeed experience anxiety around the issue of having enough. My own mother was such a person, and while not fearful for her future, she was careful. In a word, prudent. She saved things, even when it was not necessary. After her death, my sister and I were dealing with her household of belongings. While she was by no means a hoarder, we found so many things “saved, just in case” they might be “needed.”

The propensity to hoard goods was both a violation of the OT law and the prophets. Why? Because it places material things in the place of God, which is a violation of the first commandment: have no other gods before me.

In and of themselves, possessions/material goods/money, investment accounts are necessary for life, and in fact neutral. Scripturally, it is a matter of priorities.

Equally as serious, such an exclusionary accumulation of goods for oneself, totally disregards the needs of others. This was apparently a problem in the early church according to the Apostle Paul, but can still be an issue for us today.

There is a television series—perhaps you have seen it—titled “Hoarders”, which chronicles the devastating effects of this malady. In the extreme, it borders on/is a symptom of mental illness, when possessions take on an unreal or all-consuming influence in the life of an individual.

Jesus tells a story of a man who is, by all standards of measurement, considered highly successful. And yet Jesus called him a fool. Why?

The central character in the drama is a successful farmer-- his farm yielded tremendous crops. In fact, the crops were so great that he didn’t know what to do as a result. The only alternative that occurred to him, was to build some new and bigger barns so he could store all of his crops.

<sup>18</sup>“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. <sup>19</sup>And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.””

But the parable ends when God said to him, "You fool. This very night, your life will be demanded of you." Life is brief!

And so it was at the height of his prosperity, he died. Think about it: If he lived in Seattle today, he might well be one of Bill Gates' neighbors, with all of the social prestige and influence that accompanies wealth and living in Medina. Most people would look up to him because of his wealth. And yet a Galilean peasant had the audacity to call that man a fool.

Now Jesus didn't call the man a fool because he made his money in a dishonest fashion. There is nothing in that parable to indicate that this man was dishonest and that he made his money through conniving and exploitative methods.

In fact, it seems to reveal that he was a very industrious man, and apparently a pretty hard worker. So Jesus didn't call him a fool because he got his money through dishonest means.

There is nothing here to indicate that Jesus called this man a fool because he was rich. Jesus never made a universal indictment against all wealth. So *why did Jesus call this man a fool?*

Number one, Jesus called this man a fool because he allowed the *means* by which he lived, to outdistance the *ends* for which he lived.

That is to say, each of us lives in two realms, the seen and the unseen—the the "seen" which is physical/material world which is temporary, and the unseen/spiritual which is eternal.

God knows and promises to take care of our physical/material lives: food, shelter, clothing. These are daily necessities. The spiritual or unseen aspect of our lives is equally, if not more important, for it has to do with our values which inform the choices we make in terms of how we spend our time, our money, and so on.

The problem this man faced was conflating/confusing these two realms...the material and the spiritual. It is important to understand the difference between the two. This man was a fool because he didn't do that.

This man was a fool because everything in his life revolved around himself—notice all the singular, first person pronouns in this brief passage—I, me, my, mine—predominate. He has no thoughts beyond himself. He is unconcerned about the needs of others.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon on this passage. This particular paragraph stood out:

**This man was a fool because he allowed the *means* by which he lived to outdistance the *ends* for which he lived. He was a fool because he maximized the minimum, and minimized the maximum. This man was a fool because he allowed his technology, to outdistance his theology. This man was a fool because he allowed his mentality to outrun his morality. Somehow he became so**

**involved in the *means* by which he lived, to the exclusion of the ends, or spiritual/eternal matters.**

Bottom line, it's not about the money. It's not about the stuff. It's about **our attitude** toward money and possessions. It's about the unfulfilled promise that those offer.

Let's admit it. We get sucked into it too don't we? Madison Avenue advertisers get us every time..both on television and the internet. We are inundated with messages that exploit our insecurities, and sold solutions that promise far more than they can deliver.

Advertising is designed to exploit our inborn sense of insecurity. This kind of 'inadequacy marketing', first identifies and exaggerates something we are insecure about -- our breath, our body, our status, etc, Then it sells us a solution -- mouthwash, a weight loss program, a bigger car, etc. -- that promises to remedy our situation and make us "acceptable" again.

Furthermore, materialism -- or consumerism or "affluenza" or whatever else you might want to call it -- has one distinct advantage over the abundant life Jesus extols: it is immediately tangible.

Relationships, community, purpose -- the kinds of things that Jesus invites us to embrace and strive for -- are much harder achieve. We know what a good relationship feels like, but it's hard to point to or produce on a moment's notice. Relationships require an investment of time and energy.

It is much quicker to go to Fred Meyer and purchase deodorant or mouth wash, than it is to develop a trusting, mutual relationship.

So we too, like the man in the parable, substitute material goods for immaterial ones because, well, they're right there in front of us and we've got a whole culture telling us that this is the best there is. Purchase this item, drive this car, wear this brand—and we will be fulfilled, secure, lacking nothing.

St. Augustine once said that God gave us people to love, and things to use, and sin is confusing the two. Our problem is not money, nor is it in our possessions, but our propensity to think and act as if either of these can satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts.

The "if your house is burning" exercise illustrates for us what we truly value.

May we begin to clarify what Jesus means when he promises the abundant life: What does that really mean and what does it look like? Here's a hint:

It is much less about what we have, than who we are and the values that inform our life choices.

Instead of living out of fear and insecurity, how do we grow deeper trust in God's promised provision for us?

How do we unclench our hands, not only to receive God's good gifts but also to extend God's generosity toward others?

When we discover the answers to these questions, we will be truly rich and ultimately satisfied!

May God help us!

Let us pray.