

Addition By Subtraction

Luke 12:22-34

November 18, 2018

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

I've been learning to live with less lately. It really started with my diet. My doctor sent me to a nutritionist who tried to provide an education on what I should be eating and what I should stay away from. She told me to increase my intake of healthy fats (like olive oil and avocados) and that I also needed to embrace a "life-long adherence to a gluten-free diet." As far as I know, I've "adhered" to that advice and, although I miss some food items, generally I've not missed the gluten, the breads and cakes, etc. Rice crackers are remarkably good and gluten-free humus is quite satisfying. I'm not sure I've quite figured out the difference between "gluten-free" and "calorie-free," but I'm eating differently these days and trying to eat less.

This past summer, in anticipation of a study-abroad trip with the church to Scotland, I found myself packing my suitcase very carefully. Airlines limit the weight you can pack into a suitcase while traveling. The trip would begin with a tour of Scotland then transition to Ireland with my wife, and brother, and his wife, and then visits with more family in Tennessee, Montana and Minnesota. The six-week excursion included golf and riding motorcycles (which requires very different "outfits" by the way). As I stood in front of the closet, looking at the options, I carefully chose what would be comfortable and versatile — clothing that I could either "dress up" for formal events or "dress down" for casual ones, with layers for warmth if needed. Some rain repellent clothing was necessary since we were going to Scotland. I discovered I didn't really need a closet full of clothing but could function quite well with well-chosen items. I'm learning I can live well with less – and even better with fewer choices to make. I'm reminded of it every time I pack my bags to travel somewhere. Reminds me of the comment Dolly Parton made once, "It costs a lot of money to make a person look this cheap."

We're entering the holiday season with its many excesses. And yet we have this scripture today that reminds us that all our stuff, which is supposed to make life easier, can actually make our lives unmanageable. This section in Luke's Gospel begins with the caution, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then Jesus tells about a man who has a problem. He enjoys a spectacular grain harvest. So spectacular that he has no place to store all that grain. Anything wrong with that? Not so far! As far as we know this man came by his wealth honestly. He didn't cheat, or lie. He didn't steal. Jesus said, "He thought to himself. He had a private discussion with himself saying, 'What shall I do with all this grain that I've harvested? I know, I'll do this: I'll pull down my barns and build bigger ones.'" Pretty drastic action! He doesn't just build additions to his old barns. He tears down his old barns and builds new ones, underscoring that this was some harvest. I mean, if he had enough from this harvest to tear down all his old barns and build new ones, he had a spectacular, miraculous harvest. He hadn't just done well. He'd done *very* well.

"I will say to my soul . . .," says the man. (I guess when you're this rich and this spectacularly successful, you don't need to consult with anybody else. All the conversation is a monologue.) "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, and be merry. It's the holidays after all!" Well, I have a feel for this sort of thing. I have a diploma somewhere, and a monthly printout of my 403b account and a brokerage statement. It all means that not only have we done a good job of the job of life, but we've also built a kind of fence around life — full barns, a retirement account — so relax, eat, and drink. Some people call this the story of a "rich fool" but Jesus doesn't. Instead of talking about the man, Jesus begins talking about the land and what it produced. The land of a rich man produced abundantly. What first impresses Jesus is this miraculous, barn-busting harvest. A gift! The man received a gift. And that is the problem. The man says to himself, "How do I manage my miracle? What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops. So I will pull down my barns and store my grain and my goods in new ones." *How do I manage my miracle?* That's what Jesus is talking about.

A psychiatrist was researching people's self-image. He gavethem some sort of test to solve. When they either failed to solve the test or when they succeeded, he asked them to explain their failure or success. How did they account for it? Maybe it won't surprise you to hear that the psychiatrist concluded, "We tend to blame others for our failures and to take credit for our successes."

This man trying to manage his miracle is having a monologue with himself, congratulating himself, talking to himself, making plans and celebrating himself. But at the end of the story we hear another voice intruding into his monologue — the voice of God. It is a voice that does not accuse him of injustice, or immorality, or even greed. God just calls him, "You fool!" Anyone

else might call the man “prudent” or “far-sighted”. He didn’t get what he got unjustly, so why did God call him a fool?

Karl Barth, a famous twentieth century theologian, used to say that one day a procession of people will travel out to the cemetery, say some words over a grave, and then everyone will return home – everyone but us! Then what? “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be then?” End of story. In the Greek, the text says, “Fool, this very night *they* shall demand your life.” *THEY? Who is THEY?* I think *they* are the *things*. Jesus closes with a question, “And whose will they be?” Surprise! It’s the stuff, the things, the gadgets, cars, clothing, the vacation homes, the machines. All the things that were supposed to make my life easier, can often make life unmanageable. Some days it seems I have no other purpose than to tend to, fix, take care of, and manage these things. I wait for the plumber or appliance repairman to arrive within a four-hour window. They never do. I’m not managing any of this . . . It’s all managing me! I thought I had control of this stuff, but this stuff has control of me. Makes me realize there is a big difference between possessions and treasures.

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God. Just me, what’s mine, and my management of my achievements. There’s no miracle, no food or family future as a gift. It’s mine, to be managed for me. There’s no transcendent higher claim upon me and my possessions, other than my own comfort and contentment and pleasure. There’s no connection between my resources and my responsibilities.” The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

Note here that God doesn’t punish anyone in the story, unless you think of reality as punishment enough. The intruding voice of God only states the facts. Just the facts! “Fool, this night they demand your life from you. All this management and preparation, these big barns and prudent insurance policies, whose will they be?”

Fred Craddock tells of a missionary family serving in a strife-ridden country. They were a family of four, with a mother, father, and two children, a son and daughter. Tensions rose in the country and one day a government agent came to tell them they had to leave on Monday. All foreigners were being expelled. “You can take 500 pounds with you – no more. Sort through what you have and be ready by Monday morning.” So the whole weekend they sorted through

their things. What did they really need? What did they value most? They went through clothes, books, computers, and furniture. The children sorted their toys and games. They weighed what they had and it was over 1,000 pounds. They went back over their belongings and decided to leave the sewing machine and a number of books. They weighed again: 700 lbs. They had to go through the sorting process again, letting go of even more. Finally they had exactly 500 lbs.

Monday they arrived at the airport. A stern looking official asked, "500 pounds exactly?"

"Yes sir! Exactly 500 pounds."

"Looks too much to me."

"On no, we weighed it. 500 pounds to the ounce."

"Okay young man, step up here on the scales," said the official.

"Wait a minute, you mean you're weighing the children too?"

"Oh yes, 500 pounds in total!" said the official. "The boy weighs 91 pounds. Okay young lady step up here."

"You're counting the children's weight too?! Oh no! Here, eliminate these boxes, get rid of this stuff. We don't care about these things. But our children, of course we include the children!"

Jesus looks at life and defines "rich" very differently than most of the society in which I live. I mean, I have a job but I treasure my family. I have a house, but I treasure my home. I possess a bank account but I treasure my friends. I have a car but I treasure my freedom. Yes, I have clothes but I treasure my health. I have a calendar but I treasure my time. I have a heart but I treasure love. And ". . .wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also."¹

Sometimes you actually add to your life by subtraction. "Don't worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will wear. For life is more than food, and your body more than clothing. Consider the ravens . . . God feeds them and how much more valuable are you than the birds?! Can any of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your life? If you are unable to do so small a thing, why do you worry about the rest?"

This Thanksgiving be grateful for your miraculous, abundant harvest and consider again how

¹ Matthew 6:21

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you are going to manage your miracle. Just be sure it isn't a monologue. Thanksgiving is a national holiday set aside for thanksgiving and prayer. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.