

## What Would Jesus Say About Materialism?

Luke 12:13—21

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A religious coalition led by Rev. Jim Ball launched a media campaign three months ago asking Americans “What Would Jesus Drive?” The advertisement, designed to discourage religious people from driving SUV’s, pickups, minivans and other gas guzzling vehicles, quickly captured the attention of Americans. The three major auto makers publicly stated that they already made fifty models of fuel efficient cars, but trucks and SUV’s now outsell cars at dealerships across America.

Comedian Jay Leno said Jesus would obviously drive a big truck since he was in the construction business and had twelve employees.

Biblical literalists quickly announced Jesus would drive a Honda without talking about it since in John 12:49 Jesus says, “*I did not speak of my own accord.*”

Evangelist Pat Robertson said the whole discussion is offensive and blasphemous while some environmental advocates reminded us that the donkey Jesus rode could probably go forty to fifty miles on a bale of hay, which would make it environmentally friendly.

Before we ask for your keys at Communion today, let us consider that question in a little broader context. “What Would Jesus Say About Materialism?” Let us search for the answer in Jesus’ parable of the successful farmer, one of sixteen parables where Jesus talked about money and possessions. In this simple parable, I believe Jesus gives us some instruction about how to live our lives.

### WORK IS WORTHWHILE.

*The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop (verse 16).*

The man was successful in his endeavors. My father is a farmer. For sixty-five years he dug out a living for himself and his family by the sweat of his brow and the labor of his hands. Even now, in his dying days, his big hands are rough and calloused. My mother liked to entertain preachers on Sundays. I shall never forget one Sunday afternoon when a particularly pious pastor was gazing over the ridge of green pasture as cows grazed in the background. In his most profound preacher voice he said, “God has surely given you a beautiful farm”; to which my Dad replied, “Yeah, and you should have seen it when God had it by himself.”

In the creation story of Genesis the Bible says, “*The Lord took Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*” Work is not a curse. Work is a command of God for the good of humankind. It is a partnership with the Divine for the sake of creation.

My friend Doug Meeks says, “Work has to do with livelihood, with inclusion in the community, and with a sense of personal dignity and well-being. A humanizing economy depends upon the creation of meaningful work for every person who is able and wants to work.”

Day by day I rejoice in a meaningful job and ponder ways I can do it better, for nothing less than my best is acceptable to God to whom I am ultimately accountable. Hard working people are usually successful people. Success is not a sin, though there are some who would like for us to think so as they interpret the scripture. WORK IS WORTHWHILE.

#### SUCCESS IS A RESPONSIBILITY.

If you do well with your work, then what are you going to do? This is the dilemma in which this farmer finds himself. “*What shall I do?*” (verse 17). With the success of the day comes the question of the night. What am I going to do with what I have? The benefits of the day become the concerns of his life. A little later in this chapter Jesus says, “*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even much more will be asked*” (12:48).

It was a vulnerable moment known in the funeral home business as the first viewing. I stood with a widow as she took the first look at the bodily remains of her very successful deceased husband. After several moments of silence she turned to me and said, “He’s smiling. Howard, look, he’s laughing. He always said he was going to leave me with all his business and now he is lying in his casket laughing about it.” The pain of responsibility was settling in for a widow that day. Success brings serious responsibility.

I have come to believe the greater our number of things, the deeper our need for spiritual values. Let me say that again. The greater our number of things, the deeper our need for spiritual values. If you don’t think God has anything to say about your monetary affairs, you had better read the Bible again. Jesus talked more about possessions than he did about heaven and hell. In the Bible there are about five hundred verses on prayer, less than five hundred about faith, but more than two thousand about money.

One of our problems in America is that we have removed God from the questions of economy. Does faith have anything to say about the vehicle I drive, the place I live, the community in which we raise our children? We have assumed not, but we have assumed wrong.

The beginning of this farmer’s demise is in the question, ‘What shall I do? I have all these things. What shall I do?’ Now if you like to count, there are twenty-one personal pronouns in five verses that compose this parable. When you ask the wrong question, you are going to get the wrong answer and the problem with this guy is that he asked the wrong question. A person of faith asks, “What is the will

of God for me on this matter?" To ask the question is to bring my faith to bear upon the situation. Success is a sacred Christian responsibility.

#### MORE DOES NOT MAKE US MERRIER.

*"This is what I will do, I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones so I can accumulate plenty of good things for many years, so I can take life easy, eat, drink and be merry"* (verse 18). Jesus calls such thinking foolish. No, he said it stronger than that. He said, *"You are a fool for thinking things like that."*

More is not the final answer. A market society has made consumers of us all. It doesn't matter how much we buy, there is always plenty more that we want. In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Charlie Brown and Linus were reflecting on the day and Charlie Brown said to Linus, "We had a wonderful day today, didn't we? Did I make you happy?" Linus replied, "I think I am about one cookie away from being happy." Whatever your age or stage of life may be, whatever your status of life may be, suspect you are just about one cookie away from being happy. It is inherent in the human situation and we learn it extremely young.

I spent most of this last week with my grandson, Caleb, down in South Georgia on a little vacation. He immediately found the toy store that was up the street from the condo in which we were staying. Of course, I took him to the toy store to play like good, friendly grandfathers are supposed to do. After he had played with the free stuff he wanted to buy something and naturally I immediately said, "Of course, you can buy something." He selected a toy. We went home; he enjoyed it. The next morning in my bed before breakfast he said, "Poppy, are we going back to the toy store today?" I replied, "Well, of course, we are going back to the toy store today; but I need to tell you, we will just go look today; we won't buy anything." He looked at me with big tears in his eyes and said, "But, Poppy, I **need** to buy something today." We went back to the toy store and after we visited and played awhile with the free things I said, "It's time to go." Caleb said, "But I **need** to buy something." When I held my ground (every grandparent here knows how hard that is) saying, "No, we came to look today without buying anything," he threw a temper tantrum. I thought here is a three-year-old child who could not even tell me what it was that he wanted, but he **needed** something because he was in the store. Is that human nature or is the American marketing imbedded so into a three-year-old's mind that wants quickly become needs driven by gnawing desires for something that is impossible to describe?

Someone said we are a country of expanding wealth, but sinking spirits. Makeovers do not make us beautiful people. Exotic vacations do not give us peace of mind. Big houses do not guarantee happy families. Expensive gifts do not buy love. Boomers born by the mantra of "the one with the most toys wins" are now discovering that as they age the essence of life is trying to find a place to put all their stuff. More does not mean merry.

#### A LEGACY IS MORE THAN A LIVING.

The whole thing that prompted this parable was an argument over inheritance.

Who gets what is left when the guy is gone? Some things never change. Jesus said, 'I am not going to enter this argument. I am not going to be the arbitrator in this divisive concern of the family.' But he tells a story which ends with a probing question: "*Who will get what you meant for yourself?*" (verse 20). Who will get what you meant for yourself? Think about that.

This prompts two questions from me. What are we leaving for future generations? There is a bumper sticker that you see from time to time that says, "I'm spending my children's inheritance." If it is a matter of money, then go ahead and spend it, but if it is a matter of livelihood, we are fools to waste our children's inheritance.

Someone said that if people and waste were laid side by side across the United States of America each square mile of the nation would contain fifty-six people surrounded by fifty-four tons of rubbish, including three junked cars, twenty-six discarded tires, eighty-five hundred bottles, seventeen thousand cans, one ton of plastics and eight and one-half tons of paper. Is that what the generations to come after us will have?

Are we investing in that which outlasts us? Jesus was quite clear about it when he said, "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures in earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*"

We assume that people's money follows their heart. Get them interested and they will give their money. But Jesus said that we don't have it right and he needs to turn it right side up for us. The heart always follows the money. If you want to know what is most important in your life while you are filing your taxes, just consider where you spent your money last year and you will see.

The longer I live the more I am convinced that only two types of people populate the earth. There are getters and there are givers. The real point of materialism is not how much we have, but what has us. It is not how much we hold, but how tightly we hold it. It is not what we've got, but how we got it. The real test of materialism is whether our goods have made us proud or grateful, self sufficient or God dependent. Are we striving for selfish gain or the common good?

Many people of the lower socioeconomic strata of English society were converted in the great Wesleyan Revival. They found almost instant success. After all they replaced boozing, gambling and wasting money with hard work, family life and devotion to God. As a result, they climbed the ladder of success. That worried John Wesley a great deal so he gave this advice, "It is the duty of every man to work as hard as he can, to make as much money as he can, to spend as little as possible, so as to give away all he can."

May we, who call ourselves Methodists, dare to do likewise.











