

“You Can’t Take It with You”

There is a story out of Chicago about an auto salesman named Joe, whose wants far exceeded his income. In order to buy more ... in order to own more, Joe began to gamble thinking he would strike it rich and be able to buy the many things he coveted. But, as was to be expected, Joe lost all his money, as well as his car and his house. Because of the chaos Joe created, his wife left him. In order to anaesthetize the pain, Joe began to heavily drink. All this led to Joe’s down fall and he became one of the street people spending his nights on Chicago’s lower Southside.

One night, as Joe drained the last drop from a bottle of Wild Turkey, there was a puff of smoke and a genie rose out of the bottle. The genie said, “Master, I am your genie. I have come to grant you one wish.” Joe grinned and said, “If I can have anything I want a foreign car dealership.” There was a flash of light and when Joe opened his eyes, he was standing in his new showroom: a Chrysler P. T. Cruiser dealership in downtown ... Tokyo!!

As humorous as this story is, between the lines, there is a valid truth. Greed is a human trait. In one form or another, greed is manifested in all of our lives. Essentially, greed is that sinful relationship we have with material possessions ... sinful in the sense that our attitude ... our behavior towards the things that we own or want ... motivate us to want more ... even to the point that the more things we own, the more they own us.

Greed is apparent when our emotional state evolves into anxiety ... anxious over losing what we possess ... anxious over items becoming damaged. Anxiety is the foundation of worry, and worry leads us to becoming obsessive ... we start thinking “what if this happens or what if that happens?” Greed ... anxiety ... worry ... all three are interconnected. Our life is a mess when we become slaves to these emotions because greed, anxiety, and worry spawn high levels of stress.

One of the weaknesses that you and I have is our apparent inability to distinguish our needs from our greeds. As the farmer said, “I’m not greedy. All I want is the land next to mine!” There are some people who, in a fifty-fifty proposition insist on getting the hyphen, too. Believe me, I know first hand. When I was in seminary, and SueAnn and I were having a financially difficult time, I took my grandfather’s diamond ring that my step-grandmother had given me to a pawn shop to be appraised. The jeweler told me the ring was worthless. Before giving me the ring, my step-grandmother had replaced the big diamond with a piece of glass.

When we place alongside our attitude toward material things and our belief in Jesus Christ, we have a real faith crisis. The crisis is solvable, but it means we must listen to Jesus’ teachings very carefully and allow them to shape our attitude accordingly. We must heed our Lord’s warning when he says in verse 15: *Guard yourself from every kind of greed because a person’s true life is not made up of things they own, no matter what their abundance.* This is the heart of today’s lesson from the Gospel of Luke.

Our reading began with a person coming to Jesus, asking him to settle a legal suit. This was not an uncommon practice in Palestine ... for a person to go to a respected Rabbi requesting a decision. However, Jesus refuses to be involved in anyone’s dispute over money. Instead, Jesus uses the opportunity to teach his followers about the attitude his disciples are to have toward material things. Jesus told the person who came to him that there was a greater gain than getting an inheritance and a greater loss than losing it. Possessions do not give life ... that is true life. True life comes from fellowship with God ... God who gives us all we have ... God who holds us accountable for its use. Today’s middle hymn covers this point quite well: *We give Thee but Thine own, Whate’er the gift may be, All that we have is Thine alone; A trust, O Lord, from Thee.*

This being Stewardship Sunday, it is fitting that we squarely confront this issue between greed and faith, and a quick study of the Parable of the Rich Fool may help ... may help our faith grow stronger and may help us to become less anxious and worrisome. Two points stand out regarding the rich fool: first, he never saw beyond himself. There is

no other parable in the New Testament that is so full of the words “I, me, my, and mine.” A school boy was once asked what parts of speech “my” and “mine” are. He answered “aggressive pronouns.” The rich fool was aggressively self-centered. Being blessed with a rich harvest, the only thing that crossed his mind was how was he going to store it? It never entered his head to give any of it away. His whole attitude is reverse Christian thinking. Instead of denying himself, he aggressively affirmed himself ... instead of finding his happiness in giving; he tried to conserve it by keeping. The Romans had a proverb that said that money was like sea-water ... the more a person drank the thirstier they became.

The second point is that the rich fool never saw beyond this world. All his plans were made on the basis of life here. The rich fool looked upon his possessions as his own and not blessings ... gifts from God: “my barns” ... “my grain” ... “my goods” ... “my soul.” He made the mistake of thinking that possessions gave him life. After all, what would have been the meaning of many years of ease ... eating, drinking, and being merry? But for as little as possessions can give us life, they cannot give us existence. The ultimate truth is ... death separates us from things.

We cannot take anything with us beyond this shell of existence as proof that we lived a worthy life. God alone is Lord of life, and a person truly lives only when they are rich towards God in faith, obedience and service. William Barclay writes in summary: *If a person seeks the treasures of heaven, their heart will be fixed on heaven; but if they seek the treasures of earth, their heart will be bound to earth --- and some day they must say good-bye to them ... as the grim Spanish proverb puts it, ‘There are no pockets in the burial shroud!’*

Indeed! Death separates us from that which we possess in this life. There are no big blue Moyer moving vans behind the funeral procession! Therefore, the faith question confronting us is: are we bound to this earth or are we bound to Christ? Jesus’ disciples have a true sense of values and recognize that real life is not measured in terms of possessions, but in terms of gifts ... blessings that we have received from God to use in bringing about God’s Kingdom here on earth. When we use our gifts to grow our faith, the attitudes and behaviors of greed, worry, and anxiety decrease and sharing, caring, and love increase. Faith directs us to look beyond ourselves to the point that who we are as a person and what we own are God’s instruments ready and willing to be used by God in His service. In fact, if you think about it, your actions of faith are the keeping of Jesus’ two commandments: love God and love the other.

Therefore, when we say, “I believe!” our words are interpreted by God to mean we are willing to give our total life over to God to be directed and used as God sees fit. When we say, “I believe!” we are saying we are willing to be set free from this world ... that everything we possess, we look upon as God’s gifts ... blessings to us rather than possessions for which we have worked and deserve. When we say, “I believe!” we are saying “my pledge to God is in fact dedicating my life to serving Him.”

Stewardship is simply our Christian life lived ... our living out the attitude that we are placed here on earth to serve God and God alone. In grateful praise to God, we give of ourselves to others demonstrating that we truly believe. So, if we chose to be greedy, we are choosing a life full of anxiety and worry from which we will never be free. If we chose to be generous with our life ... compassionate, caring, kind ... then we chose a life of faith ... and being faithful will always make us free. True, death may separate us from the things of this life, but death will not separate us from the love and grace God has for us in Jesus Christ, our Savior. Of course, when you die, there is one thing you will take with you ... you will take with you your faith and the accounting of your living faithfully. Amen.

Prayer: O Lord, forgive our fears that stifle our stewardship. Forgive our giving in and our giving up instead of giving ourselves to Christ’s mission of love. Remind us that our hope is in standing up and risking, in taking our stewardship seriously. Help us to remember, O Lord, that the stewardship question is not really how much will we give? The stewardship question is how will we spend what we have been given? We pray it will be faithfully and cheerfully.