

“Your Money or Your Life?”

Luke 12:13-21

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” ¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’ ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” (ESV)

For the past two weeks (today is number three) we’ve been looking at the issue of stewardship in giving. What does all that mean? We started in Deuteronomy chapter 8 where God came to Israel giving them a warning about a big potential problem. Israel had been in bondage, in slavery, in poverty in Egypt. God delivered them from Egypt and was going to take them into the Promised Land. Right before they went in He said, “You know what? I need to tell you, if you thought poverty in Egypt was bad, let Me tell you something that’s going to be even worse for you. It’s going to be prosperity in the Promised Land.” In other words, Egypt was a place of physical hardship but the land of Canaan where you’ll be wealthy and prosperous, that’s going to be a place of spiritual hardship for you. He reminded them, “The way that you avoid the spiritual hardships is to keep in mind a couple of things. One is that everything you have comes from Me.” To the person who might say, “I worked hard for my stuff” God would reply, “Even the gifts that you have, even the ability to earn wealth, came from me.” So that set the foundation.

Last week we looked at Malachi chapter 3. In Malachi chapter 3, Israel has a problem. They are complaining about the fact that God has not blessed them. God basically comes and tells them (I’m paraphrasing of course) “The reason I haven’t blessed you is because you have not exercised any faith. Blessing only comes by faith.” They asked, “How have we done this? What do we need to do to make this happen?” God said, “You’ve held back your tithes and your offerings.” In the Book of Malachi, the primary evidence that God had that Israel didn’t really trust Him was the fact that they didn’t give. It was the fact that they were not generous. What’s the remedy to that? God told them, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse and prove Me. Test Me. Test Me in this. If you bring the whole tithe in I will make blessings flow down from heaven the likes of which you’ve never seen.” The question is, “Does that mean Christians are supposed to tithe?” Last week I told you, “No. Christians are supposed to do a lot more.” If anything, tithing is a minimum. In the Old Testament it was ten percent, in the New Testament the standard is one hundred percent. Oftentimes when we think about giving, we think about it in terms of, “What’s my minimum obligation? What’s the minimum I can get away with and feel like I’m doing okay?” In the New Testament it says the minimum is one hundred percent because the object of our faith, the one who sets the example for our giving, is Jesus Himself. Jesus gave one hundred percent. He gave everything so that He might save you and me. So the question is not, “Do I have to give ten percent?” The question is, “How much can I give? How much should I give? How generous ought I be?” That’s a question you have to answer for yourself.

This week’s text sort of puts things in perspective. I was thinking about this text as I read through it at the beginning of the week. The first thing that came to my mind, which is often the case, was a movie. It was Indiana Jones III “The Last Crusade.” That’s the one with Sean Connery. The whole movie revolved around Indy and Sean Connery racing the Nazis to find the Holy Grail, literally the cup that supposedly Jesus used at the Last Supper. They find it. Toward the very end of the movie after everything’s sort of resolved, an earthquake happens as they bring the Grail out of its storage place. The earth begins to crack and the Grail tumbles down into one of the crevices as the earth has opened up. Remember Elsa Schneider, Indy’s evil love interest, the Nazi sympathizer? She dives into this crack to get the Holy Grail and Indy catches her. There’s this tense moment where she can either hold onto Indy or she can try and get the Grail. He’s screaming, “Let it go. Let it go. It’s not worth your life.” The question is, “What is she going to do?” Well, she’s a Nazi, so we know what she was going to do. Just kidding. She went for the Grail, and in the process of trying to get the Grail, the treasure, she lost her very life.

Today’s text is along those lines. Is what you’re pursuing actually going to gain life for you or is it going to cause you to lose life? Is it going to bring blessing to you or is it going to cause you to lose blessing. We’re going to look at three things in the parable this morning. The first thing we’re going to look at is a warning. The second thing we’re going to look at is the parable. The third thing we’re going to look at is a question. In our case I’m going to call it the \$71,000 question. Let’s look first at the warning.

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” (ESV)

This is an interesting text because if you’re reading through the Gospel of Luke, chapter 12, it seems almost out of place until you begin to think about it. Up to this point, what Jesus has been doing is warning His disciples about things that are going to be challenges to their faith or things that might cause them to struggle with their faith. In the passage just preceding this, He’s been talking about persecution. “One of the biggest dangers you’re going to face is persecution. You’re going to be tempted to leave the

faith. You're going to be tempted to disown me." Jesus says, "Don't fear. They can only kill your body. In fact the Holy Spirit, when you're brought before them, will give you words to say." Then out of nowhere this guy shows up and says, "Teacher. Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." It seems like the text goes in a completely different direction, but it really doesn't because Jesus uses this event as a teachable moment to take on another thing that is just as big a danger to your faith as persecution, and that's the issue of greed. So He is still talking about dangers to our faith, but He's just talking about a different one now. The man comes and says, "Teacher, divide the inheritance between me and my brother." Who is the guy? No one knows, really. We can only speculate that he's probably a younger brother who felt like he hasn't gotten his share from his father's inheritance. In the Ancient Near East the older brother got the lion's share of the inheritance and the younger brother, if he got anything, might get upwards of a third. Oftentimes, of course, they would dispute that. They would go to the rabbi and say, "Rabbi, would you decide?" Rabbis would make some kind of ruling and they'd abide by it and leave. But really what you see here is a family being split over the issue of inheritance. Statistically speaking if you're in here today, there are people in our room who have struggled over this same issue. My family did.

I remember as a little kid thinking it was crazy. As an adult I really think it's crazy. My grandmother and her sister were both widows and they cared for their aging parents for about twenty years in a small house in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, that was about \$30,000 when it went up for sale. They had four other siblings and when her parents died, the wealthy siblings came to my grandmother and her sister and said, "We want our share of the house." A legal battle ensued because they insisted on getting their \$9,000 apiece, or some crazy amount. But they were more concerned about getting their share than they were concerned about maybe their relationships in the family or other things. This man comes and says, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance." Notice he doesn't ask him to arbitrate. He asks Jesus to order the guy. "Tell him to divide it." Unless you're reading closely you'd think Jesus gives him a non-answer. He says, "Man. Who am I to judge or be an arbitrator for you?" But then Jesus does give him an answer. Jesus gives him the solution to his problem, and it's the only solution that will make him happy. Instead of Jesus saying, "Okay, let me get all the paperwork. Let's see who's done more farm work." Instead of doing all that Jesus says, "Here's what's going to make you happy. Don't be greedy." Think about it. That's what he basically says to the guy. But he says it to all of His disciples. Notice verse 15.

¹⁵ *And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." (ESV)*

He says, "Take care and be on guard against all covetousness." Another way to translate that might be, "all avarice or all greed." It's hard to translate because what it means is something like an insatiable lust for stuff - an insatiable lust for things. An insatiable lust for more of what you don't have. Jesus says, "Be on guard against all covetousness." Then he says what we all know is common sense. He says, "For one's life does not consist of his possessions." I bet if you went through and asked every person, "Do you think that's true, that life doesn't consist of our possessions?" Every person in here, I'm guessing, would say, "Well, sure." The question you have to ask yourself if we would all say yes to that (which I assume most of us would) is, "Then why does our life often and so much consist of our possessions?" Either you don't really believe that or we need to make some changes. Is your life really driven in consisting of your possessions or is it not, and where does that get you?

Have you ever read the play, "Death of a Salesman"? I studied English in college. That was one of my favorite plays to study. It was also one of the most depressing. The reason it's so depressing is because of the way the story ends. It's been out for 60 years, so I'm sorry if I'm going to give you the ending. You should have read it or seen it by now. It's even been on TV. Basically you have a guy, Willie Loman, who has a couple of sons and a wife and is good at making things with his hands. He's a woodworker, let's say. He loves doing that. He loves fixing his house. He loves working in the garden and yet he's been captured in his mind by this thing called "the American dream." "The American dream" is to get more and more stuff because "The more stuff I have, the more successful people will think I am. The more stuff I have, the more my family will think I'm a success, and the more stuff I have, the more I'll be validated in the eyes of the world." So, instead of doing that which he loves he becomes a traveling salesman. By the time he's about 60 years old he's been demoted. He's now a commission-only salesman, yet still he gives this air to the rest of the world that he's a successful salesman and things are going well. In the process he loses everything, especially the respect of his kids, especially the respect of his older son, Biff. Willy thought, "Well, the way I can get some respect (his last ditch effort) is that I'll kill myself. Because if I commit suicide then they'll get the insurance money and they'll be so wealthy they'll say, 'Look at how great Dad was. He took care of us.'" What Willy didn't count on was the fact that there's a clause in the insurance policy that said suicide doesn't count. So when you read the epilogue, what you find is that instead of all of Willy's co-workers and everyone at the funeral, the only people there are his family and two of their neighbors. Everyone's standing around trying to say nice things about Willy. Then his oldest son, Biff, pipes in. He said, "No. The problem with Dad is that he had all the wrong dreams. Wrong. Wrong. All wrong." End. You see the question for us is, "Do we have the right dreams, or do you have the wrong dreams?" Is your dream to accumulate enough stuff so that you don't have to worry about things anymore? Is your dream to be validated by the amount of things you have and the amount of money you make or is it something else? That's the question that comes up. Jesus, I imagine, knew that had to come up in people's mind, so He actually drills down and tells them a parable. He doesn't say that and walk away. He basically gives them a practical application of what this looks like when your life is consumed by your stuff rather than other things. That's what we'll talk about next. Look at the parable. I'm going to go verse by verse through this.

¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully,¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ (ESV)

The parable starts out good, or at least the parable starts out neutrally. If you’re just listening you don’t know where He’s going with this. What you have here is a guy who, on one hand, is a very shrewd businessman. He’s a great businessman. If making money is what it’s all about, this guy has the goods. We’ll talk about that more in a minute. But this man also has a fatal flaw. In spite of his great business acumen, his fatal flaw shows up right at the very beginning because it says that a rich man had land that produced basically a super-abundance of crops and he says, “Where shall I store it?” The fatal flaw of this landowner is that he apparently lacks foresight. What kind of farmer or what kind of landowner that’s good enough to produce a super-abundance doesn’t see a super-abundance coming and plan for it? So here’s this man who, all of a sudden, realizes, “I have a lot more than I can use. What shall I do? What should I do with it all? Where can I store it?” So his fatal flaw is that he doesn’t have a good idea how to plan for the future, and that’s going to be abundantly clear at the end of this parable. He says, “Where am I going to store this stuff?” So, first off the man has decided which way he is going to go. He can either take this super-abundance and be generous with it, or he can take this super-abundance and make a lot more money with it. In the Ancient Near East most of these villages had a couple of big landowners, but most of the other people in the village lived on a daily basis on what they could farm or what they could make. They lived sort of day by day scraping along. So this man had the opportunity to make his whole village wealthy. He had the opportunity to make sure everyone in his village went hungry. If nothing else, he could have taken the grain and just put it on the market. Supply and demand would have said that there’s a lot more grain than there is demand for it so the price would have come down and it would have made the whole village a different place if the man had done that. But instead he immediately says, “How can I store it?” When he begins to talk about it you also see how wealthy he was. Let me read that to you.

¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. (ESV)

How do you know that this guy’s just filthy rich? There are a couple things that are right in the text. The first thing that he says is, “I will tear down my old barns and build new ones.” He doesn’t have enough barn space for his grain. But instead of just building a new barn on land that he might be farming on, he’s going to tear down the old ones and just build bigger ones in the same spot. That’s shrewd because that means the land won’t be used for storage. In fact, he can grow more wheat, let’s say, on it. But the other thing you notice, he’s going to tear down these old barns and build new ones in the same place and he doesn’t need the profit from his super-abundance. The man is so wealthy he can take on what then would have been a major construction project without any extra money. The reason he was probably storing it is because there were highs and lows, the grain harvest would wax and wane and he knew that if he stored his wheat, the next year or the year after there would be a time when nothing grew. The harvest would be really low and then he could demand an even greater price for his wheat. What’s the goal that he has? The goal that the man has is frankly the American dream. The goal he has is the American dream for most people that I meet. What is his goal? I’ll read it to you.

¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ (ESV)

What’s the American dream? If you watch the news, a lot of people would say the American dream is to have a middle-class job and make enough money to take care of your parents. That’s not the American dream! That’s the American hope. The American dream is that you would make so much that you wouldn’t have to worry about going to work every day, that you would make so much that if you wanted to, you could just lie back, eat, drink, and be merry. Isn’t that the goal of most people? That’s my goal! It’s the wrong goal, but that’s what I wish would happen. It’s a fact. He says, “I have enough laid up for many years.” What’s interesting is a side note. You probably didn’t catch it, but this man used the first person pronoun twelve times in four verses: the word “I” or “my” or “myself” He’s even talking to himself. “I will say to myself ‘Soul.’” He does that. What is his goal? His goal is to basically be comfortable, to be selfish and to take care of himself. He said, “I have enough laid up for many years.” Now, here’s the irony. He had enough laid up for many years, but what he forgot is he’s not the one who’s in charge of his days. In the Hebrew conception of the world and through the Old Testament, their conception was God owned everything and we are stewards of it, or another way to look at it is what we have is on loan from God. When He asks for something, He’s not asking for something that’s not His. He’s asking for us to give something back that He owns in the first place. The other thing that God owns or is on loan from God is our lives. Our lives are seen as being on loan from God. That’s where we’re moving next with the question. So the parable is this: You have a guy who basically has this super-abundance. He could have done good with it or he could have taken care of himself. He chooses to only take care of himself. He chooses only to live in comfort and luxury and to have the security of wealth and then the very next thing you have this question. But before you have a question, God has a little business to do with him. Notice what God says. The man says, “I have goods laid up for many years.”

²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ (ESV)

Did you catch the irony? He put his feet up in his chair and turned on his big screen TV and said, “I have enough laid up for the rest of myself—forever.” God comes to him first and says, “Fool.” As a side note, this is the only parable in the New Testament where Jesus actually has God as a character. This issue of greed and this issue of stewardship are so important apparently that He invokes God actually coming to the man, himself, and says to the man one thing, “Fool.” What is a fool in the Bible? If you contrast wisdom and folly in the Old Testament and the New Testament, wisdom is understanding how a system works, and applying yourself

appropriately. You know how something works and you work according to the way things are. Folly, on the other hand, is either understanding how a system works and not applying yourself appropriately, or even not understanding how a system works and therefore not applying yourself appropriately. What is the system here? Why would God call this man a fool? The answer is in the rest of it. When you die you're not going to have this stuff anyway. You thought you stored up everything for years and this very night your soul is demanded of you. What are you going to do? What good is all that stuff now? The folly applies to everything, not just giving. It applies to our very hearts. Are you a fool or are you a wise? The wise person looks at the system that God has in place and says, "The Gospel says this – that I'm a sinner and I can't help myself. I'm a sinner and no matter how much good I do or no matter how many good works I do or no matter how wealthy I am, that's not enough. What I need is something else. I need a gift from someone else. That gift is Jesus." The wise person says, "I need the righteousness or the goodness of someone else." The fool says, "I'm just going to do it myself." The question is, "Which one are you? Are you wise or are you a fool?" The same thing that applies to our salvation happens to the way we give. When it comes to your giving (and I don't mean just to our church, but your generosity in general), are you a wise person or are you a foolish person? Are you generous or are you not?

There's one thing I can ensure you that is going to happen. You're going to die. Some of you will die sooner than you think. If you don't believe that, during the past five or six weeks our church has had five or six memorial services. Some of those people did not plan on being taken. Yet they were. Knowing that God could come at any moment, that life is fleeting, that you can't depend on being here from one day to the next, what are you doing with all of the things God has given you? Are you working with him and changing the world or are you not? Are you just trying to be comfortable until you die? I hope you're working with Him because just trying to be comfortable until you die shows you really don't understand what He's done for you in the first place.

The reason that I preach about giving every single year is not just because I'm sick. I wish I could say I'm uncomfortable doing it. I'm not. Some people are. But the reason I talk about it every year, no matter what state our budget is in, is because you've seen all the way through with Malachi and you see here today that what you do with your possessions is maybe the primary indicator in the whole Bible of where your heart is with regard to God. I've told some elders it's been disturbing as I've been working through this, because when you look at the figures of how little Christians give, not just to their church but to anything, it makes you wonder as a pastor, "To what extent do we really understand the Gospel?" Jesus asks the question, "Who's going to have your stuff now?" You're either utilizing your possessions to work with God or you're not. When you begin to look at the figures it's mind numbing. I've shared some of them with you. The giving for the whole United States (that's Christians, non-Christians, and Jews giving to anything charitable) in 2005 was about \$92 billion. Ninety-two billion is a lot of money. But when you separate people who call themselves Christians out from that number, if those people who call themselves Christians tithed, whether to their church or anywhere else, do you know what the number would be? One hundred sixty-eight billion – just Christians. In other words, if Christians as a whole were actually generous (and I know some of you are, but some of you aren't, frankly) the world would be changed. Jesus says, "So it is." The moral of his story is "So it is" with the man. Let me read it to you.

²¹ *So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.* (ESV)

You have to be thinking, "What does it mean to be rich toward God if he might require my soul at any moment?" If Christians were as generous as we're called to be you realize world hunger wouldn't be an issue any more. It really would not. In fact I was talking about it with our Director of Operations this week. I've told you before, a lot of people in the country complain about being taxed and how much taxation there is. One thing to say, "Well someone has to help the poor." If you want your taxes to go down, be generous. Not so you get the deduction. If Christians were doing what Christians were called to do, there wouldn't be any hungry people. The government wouldn't have to take care of them. If Christians were taking care of the poor, the government wouldn't have to. And yet, Christians don't. And since Christians don't, the government comes in and then Christians complain about high taxes. It is backwards. Are you giving to the work of the ministry?

The reason I called it the \$71,000 question is because as of the end of May that's what we will be behind in the church budget. Seventy-one thousand dollars. The question is, "Do you believe the church is God's instrument for bringing people unto faith in Jesus?" If you do believe that, why would you not support that? If you think I'm just doing this so you give to our church, then give it to some other church. But give it to a church because at the end of the day the church is what God has called to win the world for Christ. The question is, "Are you doing that?" We could talk on and on and on. "What are you doing with your time?" I mentioned at the beginning, one thing that shames to me every year is to watch our children's ministers walk around and beg someone in our church to do one hour in the summer in nursery. It doesn't even take any work. Are we generous with our time? Are we generous with everything that we have? The extent to which you understand the generosity of God is the extent to which you yourselves will be generous.

Going back to Indiana Jones - the difference between the Gospel and what happened in that movie is that in the Gospel you and I are hanging over the cliff and God has reached out and grabbed us, and He's not letting go. He can't let go. He won't let go. He's promised not to let go. So the question for you and me is not, "Are you going to let go of God or are you going to try and go for the treasure?" The question is, "Are you going to be a fool and keep going for the treasure and be ripped apart because God's not going to let go?" Will you be generous? The extent to which you are generous is the extent you understand what Jesus has done for you. It's the extent to which you understand God's generosity. Think about that.