

**Luke 12:13-21**

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' <sup>14</sup>But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' <sup>15</sup>And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' <sup>16</sup>Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. <sup>17</sup>And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" <sup>18</sup>Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup>And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." <sup>20</sup>But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" <sup>21</sup>So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

**Getting Our Priorities Straight**

Dan McCoig | 31 January 2010

1.

Some cultures value stories of the wise and kind-hearted peasant.

Other cultures value stories of the wealthy, self-made man.

American culture values highly the latter stories.

Tragically, the number that too often matters the most is a person's net worth.

It is the way that score is kept so that we know who is winning and who is losing, who is up and who is down.

Granted, the burden of making the really big bucks is a load that many of us would be quite happy to carry.

But there are certainly risks associated with bulging bank accounts, and Jesus reminds us of the monstrous consequences of an inordinate attachment to material riches.

It's been about six years since Tyco International former chairman, Dennis Kozlowski, threw an elaborate birthday party costing \$2 million on the Italian island of Sardinia.

The bacchanalian event, staged to celebrate his wife's 40th birthday, featured gladiators as guards, waiters dressed in togas, imported fig trees and an ice sculpture of Michelangelo's David dispensing vodka.

This pillaging and raping of the corporate coffers was only one in a series of missteps that led to Kozlowski's plunge to disgrace, leading many to believe that the guy was vastly overrated and overpaid.

CBS.MarketWatch.com agrees.

The folks there have come up with a list of jobs that, at least in their humble opinion, are ridiculously rewarding.

Interestingly enough, corporate CEOs are not at the top of this list; that spot is occupied by mutual fund managers.

They can easily earn \$500,000 to \$1 million a year including bonuses — even though only three in 10 beat the market in the last decade.

That's major money for a not-so-great performance.

The list includes wedding photographers and airline pilots.

After all, we don't want our wedding photos out of focus, and you can't put a price on airline safety.

Other vocations on the list include West Coast longshoremen, who earn an average of \$112,000 for handling cargo, and office clerks who log shipping records into computers, who rake in \$136,000?

The foremen demand an average of \$177,000?

Next on the list are airport skycaps.

Moving through MarketWatch's top 10, we come to real estate agents selling expensive homes, ex-politicians on the lecture circuit, orthodontists and over-the-hill athletes in long-term contracts.

2.

Today's passage from Luke presents the very real risks that go along with material riches and what, if we are not careful, such riches can do to us.

In the parable told by Jesus, we meet the man who holds the most overpaid job in ancient Palestine: the rich fool.

Not that he seems foolish at first.

In fact, he's presented as a good farmer and shrewd businessman whose land produces abundantly.

With wealth pouring in much faster than he can use it, he faces a problem.

"What should I do," he thinks to himself, "for I have no place to store my crops?" (12:17).

The solution is this: He decides to pull down his barns and build bigger ones, so that he can store all his grain and his goods.

Always quick to take charge and give orders, he plans to say to his soul: "Hey soul: You are doing all right! Go ahead, relax, eat, drink, be merry!"

Then comes the big surprise: death!

Something the rich man didn't factor into his business plan or enter into his Excel spreadsheet.

God says to him, "You fool!

This very night your life is being demanded of you.

And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (12:20).

For the first time in his life, the big boss is speechless.

He realizes that his status as Palestine's most overpaid landowner doesn't help him at all.

In fact, it puts his soul in danger.

He discovers that his efforts on earth have been terribly misdirected:

He has been storing up treasures for himself, instead of becoming rich toward God.

3.

The big bucks that always felt like a blessing now cut like a curse.

This is not just a rant against the avaricious and rapacious tycoons at the head of corporate boards who make decisions that cost thousands their jobs, or who spend money foolishly and without regard for human welfare.

This is a tale of greed, about those who obsess to possess, and the greed need is a virus that can infect any one of us whether we have a lot of money, a little money, or no money.

The lesson here *is not about the virtues or perils of being successful, but about a hierarchy of priorities that reveal what type of person we are.*

Jesus' advice here is strong and to the point: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (12:15).

His words evoke the image of checkpoints, places where we can monitor the traffic that is streaming into our souls.

**Checkpoint One:** *Greed is something we have to be on guard against.*

The image suggests something that lurks, or stalks, a midnight marauder seeking a way to get in and cause mischief.

Greed is a suicide sin that can blow us up in an explosion of meaninglessness.

"You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (12:20).

That's why Jesus says, "Take care!"

In other words, take preventative, proactive, pre-emptive measures to insure that greed doesn't find soul space to occupy.

How?

Think about how our attitudes toward possessions are shaped and formed.

In a post-literate culture, the way we form ideas and values is not through reading, but through viewing.

We're influenced by what we watch on television, see in movies, and the advertising in the media — ads that we see, not read.

Most ads do not attempt to make a linear, rational argument in favor of their product.

Rather, they show us images that evoke a three-step appeal:

First, see this image and feel the need; second, buy this and use it; third, believe that by using this product you will be like the people in the images you see.

To erect a greed guard, we have to be aware that the seed of greed comes to us in this way.

Decisions can then be made about whether an item or icon really needs to be purchased, or whether the potential purchase of an item is simply a response to the greed need.

**Checkpoint Two:** *Jesus refers to "all kinds of greed."*

In other words, greed comes in all sizes, shapes and colors.

And the greed appeal will vary from person to person.

Your point of vulnerability might be completely different from another's.

I have a weakness for books and musical instruments.

I convince myself I could always use one more when the reality is I probably shouldn't.

The objects of greed are also varied and virtually infinite.

Just check out the catalogs — Cabela's, L.L. Bean, et al., or the Sunday ad inserts in the newspaper.

Some versions translate greed as "covetousness."

To covet is to break the 10th commandment, and the chances of breaking it, given the consumerist culture we live in, are enormous.

**Checkpoint Three:** *Jesus said, "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (12:15).*

Here, Jesus invites us, not to avoid a life of success, but to choose a life of significance — a life which is balanced and meaningful.

Terry Mattingly, who teaches at Palm Beach Atlantic University and is senior fellow for journalism at the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, argues that we can uncover our priorities by asking three simple questions:

1. How do you spend your time?
2. How do you spend your money?
3. How do you make your decisions?

Answer those questions honestly, and you'll have a picture of what or who is important in your life.

Jesus reminds us that life isn't about what we have; it's about who we are.

In the end, what we have isn't going to matter much.

Tolstoy's famous short story, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" comes to mind here.

A Russian peasant was told that he could have all the land he could walk around in the time between sunup and sundown.

So, with the rising of the sun the peasant began walking as fast as he could.

By mid-morning it seemed that he was moving too slowly.

So he increased his pace and didn't even stop for lunch.

As the afternoon heat beat down on him he hurried his pace even more.

He felt that he simply must circle more and more land.

By late afternoon he was soaked with sweat from head to toe.

He was exhausted.

He had walked around a huge section, but still he yearned for more.

So, he began to run.

Breathlessly he pushed himself into a fatigue he had never known.

His heart beat wildly.

Then sundown was only a few minutes away so he ran faster.

But, as he raced toward his point of beginning, a point that would make him the largest landholder in the district, he fell to the ground dead.

Jesus' comment to the rich man, to the peasant, was "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (12:21).

We can be rich toward God, and we'll never be accused of being overpaid when we're "rich toward God."

Amen.