

“Winning the War Over Stuff”
Luke 12:13-21

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Have you noticed how almost everything you buy these days has a warning label on it? Welcome to the world of protection from litigation. Some of the wackiest ones include:

A bottle of sleeping pills with the warning: “Caution, may cause drowsiness”
A fishing lure with the warning: “Harmful if swallowed”
Washing machine with the instructions: “Don’t put people inside.”

It causes me to start thinking about appropriate warning labels for worship to be printed in the bulletin:

“Sleep at your own risk”
“Caution, sermon contents may be too hot to handle”
“Not responsible for wandering thoughts.”

Jesus issued warnings:

In Matthew 6:1 He says, “*Be careful about worshiping for show.*”

In Matthew 18:1 He says, “*See that you don’t look down on little ones.*”

And here in Luke 12, Jesus begins the parable of the foolish farmer with these words, “*Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions*” (Verse 15). That’s what I want us to think about today! WINNING THE WAR OVER STUFF

Let us begin with a confession, POSSESSIONS HAVE THEIR APPEAL. We like stuff. We collect stuff and we buy more and more stuff. The fun of shopping is a way of life.

On vacation last month, I noticed one consistent thing about the five countries we visited. They had plenty of places to shop. Given the choice between food and shopping, several of our group consistently chose shopping. I bought a boat the other day. I didn’t need it, but I thought my grandchildren would like it. You know what they say about boat owners – “The two happiest days in a boat owner’s life is the day you buy and the day you sell. All other days are costly.”

Possessions give a feeling of STATUS. In Verse 16 we read, “*And He told them this parable. The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop.*” Remember Tevye in that delightful musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Trying to raise five daughters in a declining, changing society Tevye says to the Lord, “I realize it’s no shame to be poor, but it’s no honor either. So what would have been so terrible if I were a very rich man?” After all,

“If I were a rich man,
I’d build a big tall house, with rooms by the dozen
Right in the middle of town.
There would be one long staircase just going up,

And one even longer coming down.
And one more, going nowhere, just for show.
If I were a rich man, there would be chickens, turkeys, geese, and ducks in the yard. Everybody who passed by would say, 'Here lives a very wealthy man.'"

I suspect there's a little bit of Tevye in the best of us. Maybe the chickens and turkeys have been replaced by Mercedes and SUV's. We like stuff; we like to collect it. It makes the economy go.

The fact is that possessions have the appeal of SUCCESS. With more grain and bigger barns in which to store it, obviously the smart farmer was honest, hardworking and industrious. Is it wrong to be rich? No! The Church needs to repent of its prejudice against rich people while using them to fund their good deeds. Such hypocrisy certainly gains the continued condemnation of Jesus.

During the Wesleyan Revival in England two hundred and fifty years ago, Wesley noted that his converts often grew in wealth, some near one hundred fold in twenty years. That's a pretty good return, even on the Stock Market, isn't it? When people stopped drinking and carousing and started living responsible lives many of them started making money. Clean living can do that for you. Wesley started preaching this principle: Earn all you can, save all you can and give all you can. And yet, we come to this parable of a farmer whom Jesus calls a fool, not a bad guy, just stupid. As Forrest Gump said, "Stupid is as stupid does." Jesus says, "*Be careful, watch out, be alert, learn the lesson of a very successful man.*" Understand there is a difference between who you are and what you have and if you don't know that difference, your soul is in jeopardy.

THE PROBLEM OF POSSESSIONS

Watch out! Be on guard! What you have does not define who you are. Families fight over possessions. Did you see how this whole discussion got started? In Luke 12:1 Jesus is speaking to a crowd of many thousands, so packed that people were trampling on one another—Riverfront Park on the 4th of July, the Luis Palau Festival last May, Times Square on New Year's Eve. Verse 13 says, "*Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.'*"

There is at least one in every crowd, is there not? Somebody here is having family problems over an inheritance. You, who have never known such family turmoil, have mercy on the rest of us. Families fight. Whether these feuds involve the Pritzkers who own Hyatt Hotels or the Olds' who have hardly any wealth, such conflicts are messy, costly and painful. Be aware, be alert, be careful about the stuff you own because your life doesn't consist of what you have because often it is just fodder for family fights.

Be careful about the stuff you own because you are never going to have enough of it. The more you get, the more you are going to want.

Possessions are a problem. YOU NEVER HAVE ENOUGH OF THEM. Verse 18 says, *“I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones.”* When is enough, enough? It is always a little more than what you have, regardless of what you have. Did you hear about the American businessman on vacation who encountered a fisherman near a Mexican Resort? The fisherman was napping on his boat when the businessman inquired, “Why aren’t you fishing?” “Because I caught all I needed for my family this morning,” said the fisherman politely. “But,” countered the businessman, “if you went out twice a day you would catch enough fish to sell a few. Before long you would make enough money to buy several boats. With a little luck, you could start a fresh seafood business and start shipping fish all over the United States.” “What would I do then,” asked the fisherman? “Then,” said the businessman, “you would make millions. Then you could retire, get a nice place on the beach, daze at the sun and look into the beautiful ocean.” To which the fisherman replied, “What do you think I’m doing now?”

Possessions are a problem. THEY WON’T GIVE YOU LIFE. *“This very night your life will be demanded from you”* (Verse 20). That’s sobering stuff, isn’t it? Did the stress of work kill the foolish farmer? Who knows? Of this I am certain; the folly which drives people to burn themselves out for things has taken its toll on many.

Remember Big Daddy, the dying patriarch of a squabbling family, in Tennessee Williams’ play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Big Daddy and his estranged son, Brick, are wading through all the paintings, sculptures, and scores of boxes in the basement when Big Daddy picks up a clock and says, “There’s one thing you can’t buy in a fire sale, or any other market on earth. That’s your life – you can’t buy back your life when it’s finished.” We ought to know that; it is important that we know that.

Another problem with possessions: YOU CAN’T TAKE THEM WITH YOU. The final question in this parable of the foolish farmer is the most poignant. Verse 20b says, *“Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”* Jesus asked that. One of these days you and I are going to die. I’m one hundred percent sure of that. Somebody will probably publish our obituary in the daily paper, over in the back next to the want ads. If we are lucky a few people might get together for a memorial service. Then some minister reminding folks we are nothing more than dust will throw our ashes to the wind or give our remains to the worms, saying, “Dust to dust and ashes to ashes.” Walking away from that committal service somebody will think if not actually ask, “I wonder how much ol’ John left?” The answer to that question is simple; ol’ John left it all, that’s how much he left.

Somewhere in the shadows I think I hear Jesus saying to us today, “Watch out! Beware! Stay Alert! Don’t make a fool of yourself! Separate who you are from what you have! Declare to your Stuff – you are not my life. You must never own me and you will never be my God. I will not be your slave. Somebody needs to be set free today, set free from the stuff of your life. May God help it happen even now. In so doing find peace, the peace that passes all understanding.

Amen.