

Choose Your Treasure

Luke 12:13-20

READ Luke 12:13-20

The successful farmer here looks like he is being quite responsible. After all, you can't count on a bumper crop every year. And we are supposed to read the Bible as a whole, so didn't Joseph help Pharaoh prepare for seven years of famine by storing up food during the seven years of great production? Keeping some reserves seems like a good idea. The world today could learn from Joseph and Pharaoh... most of the time there is less than a six months supply of basic grains to feed the seven-plus billion people on the planet. That doesn't seem particularly responsible. So what was this fellow doing so wrong that God responded to him so harshly? "You fool!" Those are hard words to hear from God. I know I'd rather not hear them.

We are supposed to read the Bible as a whole, and what I think we should learn from this passage is the same thing that we are supposed to learn from every other passage about material possessions: it is our attitude toward things, not the amount of them, that makes material possessions either a millstone around our necks or means of grace. And the attitude that makes possessions – or food or fame or sex or power or beauty – a millstone that will sink us to the depths is greed. Greed is placing the wrong priority on the acquisition and hoarding and more acquisition and more hoarding of anything, not to be useful or responsible or charitable or generous or gracious with any of it, but to have it and treasure it. The Christian writer and theologian Daniel Clendenin has written well on this, and he defines greed as "the intense desire to possess more than we need." Greed has been on the list of the seven deadly sins since the list was first developed, sometimes called "avarice". Where responsible stewardship of any gift or resource becomes greed and throws us off the cliff is where that gift or resource becomes the object of our desire rather than the means to the one object of our desire that should be our highest priority – our relationship with God.

Christians through the centuries have responded to these Biblical teachings on the challenge of possessions and evils of greed in a wide variety of ways. We may think back to the description of the early church in the Book of Acts, where Luke tells us at the end of the second chapter that after their experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the believers...

"devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."

That model has given inspiration to centuries of monastic tradition, where there is an intentional and purposeful relinquishing of all material possessions. These are communities of faith, focused on worship and study and service. In our materially-driven culture, we are most likely to view communities like that as starry-eyed idealists, with no sense of what it takes to make the world work. Yet we know there is value in that measure of dedication and focus on relationship with God, even if that particular lifestyle seems unrealistic to us. Not everybody is called to the monastic life, which we recognize in the understanding that God calls us to all kinds of lifestyles. There is proven, unquestionable value, however, in any lifestyle in which we are intentional and purposeful about dedicating ourselves to our relationship with God.

Even in the monastic life, even with the formal dedication of one's self to a set-apart life, the challenge is still the attitude. Clendenin quotes Saint Hesychios:

"He who has renounced such things as marriage, possessions and other worldly pursuits is outwardly a monk, but may not yet be a monk inwardly. Only he who has renounced the impassioned thoughts of his inner self, which is the intellect, is a true monk. It is easy to be a monk in one's outer self if one wants to be; but no small struggle is required to be a monk in one's inner self."

To put it more plainly, it is easy to go through the public motions of devotion to God without the inner commitment that real relationship with God requires. To put it in the language of secular society, it is easy to be a hypocrite – and it is there that the church draws the most pointed criticism from the world outside watching, and is matched against perhaps the harshest words Jesus ever had for people. We proclaim our faith in God, but put our trust in our business savvy. We proclaim our desire to live as Jesus lived, but make choices that result in a life no different from the secular world. We proclaim our intention to worship, but then build worship time and space that is shallow and transitory – we get entertained for a while then go home and

resume what we were doing. That's what the world outside sees, and the world is watching. On the inside of the building, we know that we are every bit as wounded and hurting as the world outside, but the difference is that we claim relationship with the only real source of healing and wholeness. How does that difference manifest itself in who we are and what we think about and what we do and how we spend our time and how we spend our money?

Jesus challenged the successful farmer to put his possessions in their proper place. It is a different challenge than Jesus issued to others, some who He called to leave everything, some who He called to sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor, some who He called to stay where they were and live as faithful children of God, and some who He called to just drop everything right there and follow Him. To this successful farmer, and to us, Jesus issued the challenge to focus on what God promises. God does not promise us a long or pain-free life, but offers us the privilege of experiencing the life we do have as His children, in His grace. God does not promise us wealth or fame or power, but offers us the privilege of using whatever wealth or fame or power we do have for His purposes, for the building of His kingdom on earth, for the fulfillment of His commission to make disciples. God does not promise us an abundant harvest, but He does promise us abundant life if we will make the choice and bind ourselves to the choice to put our relationship with Him above all else.

The farmer in this lesson is left thinking, stewing over his own question. We are not told what he decided, or how it all turned out for him, but when his first and only thought was about himself, and not what he could do for God or the kingdom of God with his wealth, we do not imagine it will end well. There is the question for us. We are invited to put ourselves in his place and hear Jesus challenge our priorities.

Jesus does not leave us to work out the right answer here for ourselves. He gives us the solution to greed and self-centeredness: become rich toward God. Not by accumulating spiritual credits through what we do, but by dedicating ourselves to our relationship with God and to all that it means to love God first and best, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We can make that choice, because in His great grace, God has offered us the strength to make it – to put all our other priorities behind Him, and live in His abundance. Not the material abundance of this world, but the spiritual abundance of His. Won't you store up your treasure there?