

# The Cost of Happiness

Luke 12:13-21

Preached November 1, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" 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." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 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. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 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?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

**Introduction.** What is the price tag of happiness?

A few years ago a survey was conducted in Australia that asked this question. The survey revealed Australians believed it would take \$9.05 million to achieve true happiness. It would take the average Aussie some 224 years to earn that much money. (Aren't you glad you are not living in Australia?) The survey also showed that it would take about a million less to make women happy than men. (I know some of you might question that conclusion.)

(<http://au.docs.yahoo.com/info/pr/pr.html?id=21>)

If you had \$9 million, would that make you happy? I am sure that some of you would like to give it a try and then report back to us. Bo Derrick was reported to have said, "Whoever said money can't buy happiness simply didn't know where to go shopping."

There are some who seriously question whether money or possessions can improve our happiness. For example, Cassie Mogilner a professor who is doing research on the psychology of happiness and money says that a focus on money tends to have negative consequences on people (<http://moneywatch.bnet.com/economic-news/video/does-happiness-have-a-price-tag/283677/>). A psychology professor, Dr. Tim Kasser asserts: "My colleagues and I have found that when people believe materialistic values are important, they report less happiness and more distress, have

*poorer interpersonal relationships, contribute less to the community, and engage in more ecologically damaging behaviors*" ([www.knox.edu/kasser.xml](http://www.knox.edu/kasser.xml)).

While there is a variety of opinions on this subject, I am sure that many of us would be willing to take the risk of having a windfall to see if it improves our emotional lot.

The Bible tells us that every good and perfect gift comes from God (James 1:17). As I shared two weeks ago, I believe God wants us to enjoy the gifts we are given – both materially and spiritually. But is there a point at which the things we have can become detrimental to our well-being? If so, how can we guard against this danger? Let's take a few minutes to consider these questions.

## **Beware of all kinds of greed.**

The story shared by Luke about Jesus' encounter and response to the man who wanted Jesus to straighten out an inheritance situation is informative. The man wanted his share of the inheritance. But Jesus was not willing to play the role of an arbitrator. What he said is vital for us to hear: "Beware of all kinds of greed."

On the surface, this man did not seem to be struggling with greed. Most would characterize his desire as one of "fairness." Yet Jesus saw it as a kind of greed. Greed comes in various forms and at various levels. At times, greed is very subtle and at other times is outright avarice. Kin Hubbard, a humorist and author from the century past, once said, "When a fellow says, 'It ain't the money but the principle of the thing,' it's the money" ([http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Kin\\_Hubbard/](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Kin_Hubbard/)).

In the parable that Jesus tells to follow up his comments, he reveals a subtle type of greed that most of us will face in our lives. It is the greed found in a mindset that leads us to being master accumulators of stuff. Like the rich farmer, we build bigger barns to store our stuff so that we can be happy and secure.

Do you know what industry in the US has increased by 740% in the past two decades? The self storage business. If you had invested in this business 20 years ago, you probably would have made a lot of money. In the 1970's, this business sprang up around military communities and began to spread exponentially. Today in the US, one can hardly go through a community without

seeing a storage unit facility. Today there are 2.35 billion square feet of storage space in over 51,000 self storage facilities. That is 7.4 square feet for every child, youth and adult in the US. It is over \$22 billion industry each year.

A friend of mine moved across the country several years ago. When he moved he rented space to store his stuff – furniture and personal possessions. During the years it was stored, he paid several times over what the stuff was worth. He would have profited by giving it away and buying all new stuff.

While I know it is at times important and vital to store some stuff, we seem to have an unhealthy proclivity to accumulate and store. I suspect that like the farmer, we think if we have enough of the right stuff, we will live joyful lives and be secure. We imagine that the stuff can give us happiness, if not now at least in the future.

## **Life – not in the abundance of possessions.**

Jesus offered some words that can be a curative solution if we understand them. He said, "Life does not consist of the abundance of things." True life – its quality, fullness and joy- is not obtained through what we possess or how much we possess. I think Jesus would say that \$9.05 million dollars would not guarantee happiness for Australians. What if we take to heart the thought that life does not consist of the abundance of things?

Recently I rented the movie *Defiance* that told the true story of several Jews in Belorussia who sought to escape persecution and death during the German occupation during World War II. Most fled into the woods with little more than the clothes on their backs. For three years they lived a meager existence in community in the forest. One scene showed the marriage of a young couple. It showed that how in the midst of their extreme poverty and struggle, they knew the taste of human joy.

True joy does not spring forth from the amount of stuff we have. As long as we think it does, we will experience poverty of the soul. Jesus spoke at the end of this text of being rich toward God. True joy comes as we are rich toward God. But how do we become rich toward God? Jesus gives us some important clues in the parable of the farmer.

### The farmer's failures.

Jesus said that a farmer had a great year in which his crops produced abundantly. The harvest was so great; he did not have enough storage space to store it. It is fascinating to note that the text says, "The land produced abundantly." While the farmer planted or had planted the seed, it was something beyond his control that produced the abundance. Everything was right for a record harvest.

When our oldest son was a child, he received some money from the estates of two relatives. Patty and I knew we needed to set this money aside for his college. During the mid to late 90's and through his years in college this money grew substantially – nearly tripling overall. During his college years, ½ of his tuition came from those funds each semester and we paid the other half. When he graduated, he had more dollars than had been invested initially, even though we did not add a penny. Understand this had nothing to do with our understanding or skill at investing. It was purely a blessing from God and the good fortune of the market at that time. Sometimes great things come our way that have little to do with us. This was the case of the farmer.

When the farmer saw the abundance of his crops, he made a decision. He would tear down his barns and build larger ones. He thought, "Now I am set. I can live off these resources for the rest of my life and be happy." Was his problem that he wanted to provide adequate storage for the crops? Probably not. It would be better to store it than for it to rot in the fields. So what are the issues here?

I sense the farmer had four fundamental failures– (say that four times fast).

First of all, the farmer failed to consult with God about his prosperity. The only person he had a conversation with was himself – "Soul, you have ample goods." What if he had asked God the question, "Lord, why have you prospered me so?" "What do you want me to do with this abundance of grain?"

Do you know that the average American lives on \$90/day? For some of us, that figure is significantly more. In most of the rest of the world, people live on \$2/day. For the most part, our prosperity is often a matter of where we live and the opportunities we have

been given. Should we not consult with God and ask, "Lord, why have you prospered me/us so? What do you want me to do with what you have provided?" If we would practice asking this question, listening for the answer and then responding to how the Lord leads us, we would be much richer toward God.

This farmer also failed to consider others in light of his success. He only thought of himself and what he would do with harvest to make his life better. What if he had asked, "Who out there is in need that this could help? How much do I really need?"

Earlier I spoke of our proclivity to accumulate stuff. Many of us have so much stuff that we do not know what to do with it. What if we were to look into our closets, basements and attics and ask, "Of this stuff, what do I really need?" "Am I likely to use it in the next year or 5 years?" Then we can turn and ask, "Who are some who would have need of this?" Our unused stuff that sits around in storage could be a precious treasure for a family from IHN who are being set up in a place to live, for a woman who has been at Room in the Inn or for the thrift stores of Good Will that assist people in employment. Asking these questions might help to simplify our lives somewhat as well.

The farmer also was ready to abandon his ongoing purpose. He was going to relax (retire) and spend the rest of his life doing what gave him pleasure. He was ready to give his purpose to seek a life of hedonism. Throughout his life he had been a farmer who provided food. Now he was going to abandon this purpose to spend life on himself. Maybe this was an opportunity for him to adopt a new purpose.

In our culture, we have a mentality that sometimes is detrimental to people and our society. It is an understanding of retirement, when we can stop working and do what we want to do. While there comes a time for most to retire, the rest of life is not to be spent on one's self-enjoyment. God still has purpose for each of us until we draw our last breath. Retirement can give us an opportunity to do things that were not possible when we worked for a paycheck.

Tripp grew up in this church. After graduating from UNC and earning a MBA from Harvard, he became a very successful

investment banker. He was married and had three beautiful children. He was living the American dream. In his mind a question kept stirring: "What's the passion of my life or the song of my life?" At the age of 39, he resigned his position as CEO in a bank to search for what God would have him do. An opportunity opened for him to go on a mission trip to Ethiopia. There God began to deal with him and then led him into a ministry, Sports Friends, where he has invested his life and is making a difference in the lives of children and youth in some of the poorest areas of the world.

The farmer in Jesus' story failed to take thought about his future. What would happen to what he had accumulated? Whose would it be? What could be done with it to make a difference in the world?

A little over a month ago, my one of favorite aunts died, Aunt Geneva. Actually, she was a great-aunt who was close to my mother's age that they grew up with my mother. She was the last of 21 children who were born to my great-grandfather Abe Lane. Because my mother was closest to her, she had the chore of cleaning out her apartment and taking care of her stuff. From Aunt Geneva's stuff, Mom gave me a treasure – a family Bible that had a list of all Aunt Geneva's siblings, their dates of birth, marriage and death. Along with it there was a copy of the marriage license of my great-grandfather Abe and great-grandmother Canzadie. On it were the dates of their birth. My great-grandfather's birth date – 1867.

Who and what do you want to bless when you leave this world? What treasure do you want to leave to those you love? How do you intend to bless your church and those generations to follow?

If we reverse the failures of this farmer in **our** lives, we can become rich toward God. When we consult with God as to what he would have us do with what we have been given, consider who could use the excess stuff we have, keep life on purpose, and consider our future, we can store up treasure with God.

### Prayer.