

**Building BETTER BARNs**  
**Sermon, August 8, 2010**  
**Text: Luke 12:13-21**

The Associated Press carried a story a few years back about a failed bank robbery at a branch bank in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Brandishing a device that she said controlled a bomb in her car (which was parked in plain view of the front door), the woman demanded money from three tellers. Well, the tellers quickly realized the device she was waving in their faces was not a remote control for a bomb; it was a garage door opener. Police Chief Galen Ash later reported, "I think their first clue was when they saw the word 'Sears' on the end of the garage door opener." The woman was charged with unarmed bank robbery.

People do foolish things where money is concerned.

Jesus highlights this in our Gospel reading today. You know, the word *fool* appears only twice in the four Gospels. The first time, Jesus warns us not to call anyone a fool; see Matthew 5:22. The second time the word "fool" appears is here, where, Jesus uses it in this parable of the man who wanted to build bigger barns to store all his surplus. "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you."

The usual interpretation of this parable is that this speaks of the folly of a life devoted to the accumulation of wealth, and how ridiculous it is to seek security through riches. The foolishness becomes obvious, so the usual interpretation goes, when suddenly one night when God calls in His loan, the loan of this man's life (*the word translated here as "demand" is the word then used in the Greek world for the return of a loan.*) Then, the traditional interpretation goes, everyone sees with tragic clarity the utter folly of it all, that it was stupid and foolish, if not sinful, to amass riches. The lesson then drawn is that it is better to be spiritually rich and economically poor. Well, the trouble with this traditional interpretation of the text is that it does not square with our experience. Many of us can and often do find great satisfaction and pleasure in the rewards of work and the extra blessings good fortune often brings our way. And, truth be told, possessions do enhance and enrich our lives. We do not find working, and the accumulation of those things which come as a result of our work, to be evil. Our real life experience is that money has the very real ability to bring blessings to ourselves and others. And because our experience does not square with the traditional understanding of this parable, we fail to take it seriously. We really do not believe riches are evil or the satisfaction we derive from our work is somehow blasphemous. Our failure to take this parable seriously, however, is not an indication of our stubborn sinfulness as much as an indication, born of our experience, that intuitively we understand this conventional interpretation somehow misses the point.

This parable deserves a closer look. For example, the most often decried line is the "Eat, drink, and be merry" line, as if there is something wrong about eating, drinking, and being merry. Such a conclusion flies in the face of the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels. We know Jesus enjoyed a good party. In fact, His first public miracle was to transform one hundred and eighty gallons of water into wine for people at a wedding reception who have already been drinking! And as you read about last week, Jesus got a little carried away feeding the multitudes by the sea; after everyone had eaten their fill, there was enough food left over to fill twelve huge baskets. Many of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God draw on imagery of banquets and feasting and merry-making celebration. Also, Jesus' critics accused Him of being a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Jesus was clearly someone who enjoyed eating, drinking and being merry.

And to be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with having money. There is nothing inherently wrong with making and saving money ...unless you are a counterfeiter. Money in itself is not an evil. By itself, money is an amoral force. Like the force of electricity, it can light a church or it can light a brothel. It can fund a mercenary or it can fund a missionary. Like electricity, it is a force that can do much good and it can do much harm. Someone said that attaining wealth is like trading a bicycle for a car. You can give more people a ride with an automobile, you can be of great service to others with a car, but you can also become more dangerous and more of a menace to others and yourself. (My son has his permit; I'm very aware of this right now). You can help or you can hinder, you can better serve others or you can run over them, you can add to the quality of life for you and others, or you can detract from it if we don't handle these powerful forces with responsibility and care.

The man in Jesus' parable was rich; nothing wrong with that. In fact, truth be told, a lot of us wish we had his problems. Many of us have difficulty just getting by. As someone put it, "People call it take-home pay because there is no other place you can afford to go with it." It's tough for many people, especially nowadays,

and it's likely to get tougher before it gets easier. There's nothing wrong with desiring to have more money. In fact, a good number of us would do well to give more attention to our finances. According to one source, eighty-five out of one hundred Americans have less than \$250 in savings when they reach age sixty-five. In the event of a loss of income or unexpected major expense, the average American family is 3-6 weeks away from bankruptcy.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting money; in fact, it is a mark of maturity, responsibility, and integrity to produce and earn and save, if you are able. A person with no money in our society is in trouble. One of the most foolish things we can do with money is to pietistically deny its importance.

However, the Bible warns against becoming a *lover* of money. Money is a fickle lover who has no commitment to you or your well-being. And like many so-called "lovers" who refuse to make commitments, it will often leave you cold and friendless and alone. We aren't to love money; we are to love God. We are to give ourselves to God, committing our hearts and lives to the One who will never leave us nor forsake us, and then use whatever money and blessings He brings our way accordingly.

You've heard it said, "Where there's a will, there's a way." Well, I've learned that where there's a will, there's a family quarrel. In our Gospel reading, someone has obviously died and left an inheritance. The younger brother here wants his share; he wants what he believes he is entitled to, and he tries to get Jesus to intervene. He comes to Jesus and asks ... no, I mean he comes to Jesus and *demand*s, in so many words, "You go tell my brother to give me my rights!" Just as an aside, if you want to get Jesus upset, you come to Him and demand your rights. He might just give them to you; He might just give you what you deserve ... and you may not want that. This man is not asking for advice or guidance; rather, he is actually ordering Jesus to carry out his wishes. He has already decided what he wants and he tries to enlist Jesus to fight his battle. "This is what I have decided, this is what I think should happen, this is how I'm going to act, this is how things should be run, and if you, Jesus, will only do what I want, then everything will be OK." It just doesn't work that way! No, He's the master, we're the servants. Jesus is more prone to respond favorably when we approach Him as Lord and seek to live His way, rather than treat Him as our servant (*or, as someone once put it, a mark of Christian maturity is when we realize Jesus is not our celestial bellhop waiting to bring us what we desire at our beck and call, but that we are called to be His bellhops awaiting His bidding to serve*). Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Jesus then said to all who were listening, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Jesus then launches into this parable.

Now again, Jesus did not condemn the man in the parable for eating, drinking and being merry, nor even for being rich. The rich man was foolish not for having money, but because of what he planned to do (*or not do*) with that money. He was called foolish because all he wanted to do was to build bigger barns to keep it all for himself. "What shall I do for I have nowhere to store my crops?" Well, the truth of the matter is he *has* barns. His problem is that his harvest has been so abundant that his present storage facilities will not hold it all. I think his sin was not that he had become wealthy, but that he wanted to hoard all his wealth for himself. His sin was not that he wanted to eat, drink and be merry, but that he was withholding the means God had given him to allow others to do the same. In short, he was becoming a bottleneck in the flow of God's blessings to others. I think the story would have a different ending if the man had recognized he had enough for himself and planned to share his surplus with others. Jesus drives home the point with this parable that all that we have, even our very souls, are on loan from God; the first step to wisdom is recognizing that.

Notice that Jesus never directly answers the man's original request. Rather, He chooses to remind this man and all within earshot that there are things far greater than getting our share of wealth, among them are our relationships with the only two "things" that last forever ... God and people. The rich man was foolish not for having money but because of what he planned to do with that money. He wanted to do nothing more than build bigger warehouses to stash all his blessings, rather than a distribution center that could provide a way to channel this wealth of blessings to others.

All we have is on loan from God, and we are to use it accordingly. Don't stash it all away. Invest your surplus, your time, your energy, your finances in eternal things, and become rich toward God.

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<sup>1</sup> Randy C. Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989).