

The Danger of Materialism - Part 1

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[0 : 00] Our scripture reading this evening, the passage that David's going to come and speak to us from is Luke chapter 12, verses 13 to 21. Someone in the crowd said to him, teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.

But he said to him, man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you? And he said to them, take care and be on your guard against all covetousness.

For one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions. And he told them a parable saying, the land of a rich man produced plentifully. And he thought to himself, what shall I do?

For I have nowhere to store my crops. And he said, I'll do this. I'll tear down my barns and build larger ones. And there I will store all my grain and all 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, fool, this night your soul is required of you.

[1 : 04] And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God. Amen.

This is God's holy word. Amen. Amen. Well, we turn this evening to Luke chapter 12 and verses 13 through 21 to those verses that Chris read for us a moment or two ago.

There's an old saying that goes, where there is a will, there is a quarrel. And certainly where inheritance is concerned, many of us know that family disputes are not unknown.

Sometimes the squabble over who gets what can be undignified, sometimes ugly. It seems that in some circumstances, greed, covetousness has the capacity to cut through family relationships like a hot knife through butter.

And here in Luke chapter 12, we are introduced to a man who it appears was in the midst of just such a family dispute. In order to find some kind of acceptable solution to his quarrel, he decides to ask Jesus to sort it out.

[2 : 29] Accommodators ask the question, why does he ask Jesus? Why does he bring this problem to him? Perhaps it was because he saw Jesus as a rabbi, and that's how he addresses him here, his teacher.

But, of course, there were no secular courts or judges in those days. That's what people did. They took their disputes to a rabbi or teacher.

And yet I think there's more to it than just that. If you look or read through the Gospel of Luke, I think you would be astonished at the frequency of occasions where Jesus is found speaking about possessions and wealth.

Jesus was someone who spoke a great deal about the subject of money. It was a repeated emphasis of his teaching ministry. And I think in Luke's Gospel in particular, we find Jesus speaking about money and riches time and time again.

He speaks relentlessly about these issues related to stewardship and material wealth. Eleven of Jesus' 39 parables are directly about money and wealth.

[3 : 50] And I think that may be part of the reason that this man brought his question and request to Jesus. Someone in the crowd said to him, verse 13, Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.

What is this man saying? Well, he's saying to Jesus, Jesus, please help my brother with this. Talk to my brother. Sort him out on this matter.

All your talk about money, generosity, and wealth, Jesus, I've got the very person you need to speak to. My brother really needs to hear this.

Tell him to share the inheritance with me. And Jesus' reply makes it clear he has absolutely no interest in being an arbiter between this man and his brother.

Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter over you? And Jesus categorically refuses to rule to make any kind of judgment on this issue.

[5 : 00] He makes it clear that he's not prepared to be used in this way. This man effectively was trying to manipulate Jesus to get what he wanted.

Lots of people approach Jesus in this kind of way. As if he can be used to further our own goals and ambitions.

If he can be used to serve us rather than we serve him. Yes, you know, I'm interested in the Christian faith. But Jesus, tell my boss to give me a raise.

Sort out that person who's giving me grief. Attend to the needs of my family. Yes, Jesus, I'm thinking of following you. But do this first for me. Tell this to happen or that to happen.

But friends, Jesus does not come to fit in or to endorse our agendas. He comes to bring an entirely new agenda altogether.

[6 : 03] He doesn't come to fit in with us and our goals. He comes that we might place our lives in his hands. And this man, as I said, was using Jesus.

Or seeking to use Jesus rather than serve him. And so Jesus gives him short shrift in verse 15. He said to them, Take care. Be on your guard against all covetousness.

For one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. And Jesus here lays bare the root of the matter.

He is warning us here about the danger of a covetous heart. And thinking that money and wealth will really satisfy us. Jesus wants us to understand that nothing in this world, nor everything in this world, can ever fill the eternity-shaped needs of the human heart.

In the simplest of terms, human beings are made for fellowship with God. Therefore, nothing else will truly satisfy us. Augustine's famous words, You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.

[7 : 23] Here is the great diagnostic word of our Savior. Life is not measured by barns, by bank balances, or by the size of one's estate.

Life, real life, the life that matters, is something far deeper than that. It is the life of the soul before God. And covetousness is its mortal enemy.

For covetousness is idolatry. It's the heart saying to material things, You are my God. In you will I trust. And by you I will be satisfied.

And so in order to drive his point home, Jesus goes on to tell this famous story, parable, about a certain rich man. It's a graphic warning about allowing covetousness, greed, and material idolatry to blind us to what is really important in this life.

Let's look a little more closely at this man in Jesus' warning parable. Three things. First thing is this. Look at the success he enjoyed in verses 16 through 17.

[8 : 35] The man in Jesus' story enjoyed great success. He was wealthy. He was affluent. He was prosperous. Not only was he a great landowner, but it transpires that his land produced a bumper crop.

He told them a parable saying, The land of a rich man produced plentifully. A wealthy man who's farming business, a tremendous success.

Left with a huge surplus. What a nice problem to have. And the big question he faced was this. What will I do with all of this? How is he going to use this great wealth, this great blessing that he had received?

How would he cope with this great success? Success. Now, I suppose most of us here would disown the title, wealthy or rich, successful perhaps.

We might point others to our bank statement, our overdraft. We might claim poverty. We might point to other people who have bigger houses or bigger cars, better jobs, higher incomes, and say, well, those are the rich and successful people.

[9 : 46] But the reality I think we need to face is that we are materially rich people. We live in a wealthy and affluent society.

Our society's existence is rooted in wealth creation and the power to spend. At the very heart of the life of our cities and towns are the shopping centers and retail parks.

One social commentator calls cathedrals and temples of this worldly significance. The spirit of our consumer age, summed up by the bumper sticker, Veni, Vidi, Visa.

I came, I saw, I shopped. Geographically and historically, we're amongst the richest human beings that have ever lived.

Here in the West, we've witnessed a staggering increase in wealth and prosperity over the past 80 years or so. Maybe some here, I'm not going to point them out, who might recall rationing during and just after the Second World War.

[11 : 03] I'm not included in that group, I'm pleased to say. But I can't remember my granddad telling me how he was a young boy in Nottingham, probably before the First World War, second youngest of 13.

He went to school without any shoes. So poor. And today, in comparison with so much of the world, we are wealthy people.

In comparison with our forebears, we live lives of incredible luxury. We have more food than we can eat. We have more clothes than we can wear. Our wealth opens up for us a vast array of choice, choices beyond most people in this world.

Choices that can keep us from using our resources in a way that is honoring and pleasing to God. And so Jesus' words here about the dangers inherent in wealth, riches, material success, are directly applicable to us.

Jesus' story of the rich man is our story. And it's a warning not just to other people, to Richard Branson or Bill Gates, but to us.

[12 : 15] In our materially wealthy and affluent society, the grave spiritual danger exists that money and possessions and things become our gods, absorbing our devotion, sucking from us time, effort, energy.

We think we possess them, but in reality, they possess and own us. The real test of where our allegiance and loyalty lies is revealed in what we do with what God has given to us.

It's not a sin to be rich, not a sin to be wealthy or materially successful. The big question is how we are using our wealth.

What are we doing with the resources that God has given us? What did this man do? That brings us to the second thing here I want you to notice.

From the success he enjoyed to the selfishness he displayed in verses 17 through 19. Faced with the problem, inverted commas, of what to do with this bumper crop, we're told of his plans.

[13 : 27] He thought to himself, what shall I do? For I have nowhere to store my crops. And he said, I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones.

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, and be merry.

Now, you can't help but notice that these three short verses are shot through with personal pronouns. Here was a man who thought of himself, of his own happiness and ease.

God, other people, the poor, simply didn't enter into any of his plans. Didn't enter the equation. He talks only about my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods.

No concern or responsibility for anyone else but himself is revealed. And his big mistake is that he does not understand that his wealth and possessions are merely on loan.

[14 : 37] These things are a gift from God. Yes, this man may have plowed the fields and scattered, but it was God who sent the sun and rain, and it's God who had blessed him with this bumper crop.

But he fails to see that he is but a steward of what God has given him. His whole existence is centered on himself and the horizons of this life.

And that is the power of money and wealth. It is a dangerous thing. It's an old fable about a rich man who went to visit a rabbi, and the rabbi took the rich man by the hand.

He led him to the window. He said, Look out there. He said, A rich man looked out into the street. The rabbi said, What do you see? The man said, Oh, I see men and women and children.

The rabbi took him by the hand and he led him to a mirror. Now what do you see? Now I see myself, the man replied. The rabbi said, Behold, In the window there is glass, and in the mirror there is glass.

[15 : 45] The glass of the mirror is covered with a little silver, and no sooner is the silver added than you cease to see others and see only yourself.

And that is the danger of money and wealth and material things. They become for us a rival God, an idol, a means by which we serve not God or other people, but we simply serve ourselves.

It's one of the ways, isn't it, that money is portrayed in the New Testament. Elsewhere, Jesus says, You can't serve both God and mammon. Money. We live in a society where mammon rules. Money, riches, and wealth are seen as the ultimate good, the ultimate goal. Call us to worship. Mammon calls us to bring our tithes and our offerings and to surrender our lives to Him, to believe His promises.

And as we become more wrapped up in ourselves, we give little thought to others. And yes, this kind of selfishness that we see in our own culture can be cloaked in very religious and spiritual terms.

[17 : 09] The prosperity gospel, for example, has many devotees, those who believe that it's not only a blessing to be rich, but conversely, it's a sin to be poor. You know, the song that they sing, O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

Just be thankful I haven't tried to sing that. That attempt to establish a connection between material wealth and God's blessing is one that I think is offensive, biblically speaking, indefensible.

Because the so-called prosperity gospel is nothing short of idolatry. It is the worship, not of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but mammon itself.

Because real men and women of God do not pray for a Mercedes Benz. Apologies to any of you who are driving a Mercedes Benz tonight. They pray for endurance. Real men and women of God do not seek a life of opulent luxury.

They seek a life of holiness. Real men and women of God do not make it their ambition to look like millionaires. They make it their ambition to look like Jesus. Real men and women of God do not lay up for themselves treasure on earth.

[18 : 26] Instead, they store up treasure in heaven. How we give towards God and towards others is a test of what is in our hearts, a measure of who or what is important or significant in our lives.

And our giving and our relationship to money are in a strange way at the heart of Christian life, the life of discipleship.

I think that's why Jesus spoke about it so often. It's a reality check on the depth of our faith in God, our love for God and for others. How do we use what God has given to us?

Is generosity our habit or does compassion take a backseat to our own selfish desires?

The success he enjoyed, the selfishness he displayed, and then thirdly here, the shock he received in verses 20 and 21 because Jesus' story comes to this dramatic, sudden, shocking conclusion.

[19 : 40] and you'll notice this great contrast between what the rich man says to himself and what God says to the rich man. The comparison is stark, long, drawn-out statement of the man with all his elaborate plans and projects and then the short, piercing clarity of God's Word.

God said to him, fool, this night your soul is required of you. The things you have prepared, whose will they be? so is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God.

Notice the language here. Not you will die, but your soul is required of you. The soul is on loan from God and the loan is now being called in.

It's time to settle accounts with God. And all his carefully laid plans collapse in a moment. His bigger barns will never be built.

His precious goods will pass to others. The soul that he tried to soothe and satisfy with material comforts now stands naked before the judge of all the earth, his folly exposed for all to see.

[20 : 59] What was it that made this man such a fool? Of course, as many of you know, fooling the Bible doesn't mean to say that someone is stupid or intellectually challenged.

It relates to someone who's out of touch with the reality that is out of touch with the reality of God.

Here is the person who ignores God, who rejects God, who said in his heart, there is no God.

And it's an outlook that rejects and ignores God because money has made this man a fool, blinding him to what was really, really important. He was a fool because for all his wealth, all his material success, he wasn't the master of his own life.

God cancels all his schemes at a stroke. Tonight, your soul is required of you. The madness of materialism, we cannot take it with us.

This man saved and lived, worked out all his priorities as if this life was all that there is. Stored up everything, thought he would be happy. I'm sure he was.

[22 : 07] God says to him, you fool, now who will get what you have prepared for yourself? All that he had trusted in, all that he had invested his life in, all of it disappeared at a stroke.

And friends, that's what money and material wealth can do. It can suck us in and blind us to the great realities of heaven and hell. Because the money we spend in ourselves cannot go with us. Paul tells Timothy, 1 Timothy 6-7, we brought nothing into this world and we cannot take anything out of the world. How much did he leave, people ask?

The answer must be, he left it all. The old hymn, Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah, was once printed with a mistake in one of the lines.

the misprint read, Land my safe on Canaan's side. Friends, that's one prayer that will never be granted.

[23 : 13] I received a letter a few years ago from a colleague who told me of a family friend, phoned him from England asking if he could go and speak to her brother.

He was a very successful eye surgeon. I'm just going to read the words that he wrote in his letter. She explained that he was recently discovered with an extensive malignancy in his liver, was on his way from London to Houston for treatment.

She was deeply distressed about his health and in particular his spiritual state. I agreed, I took a New Testament, I went to his temporary U.S. residence. As I knocked and entered the apartment, he was clearly distraught, demoralized by his terminal illness.

As I entered, he broke down, he began to cry, I sat next to him, I put my arm around him, I asked if I could pray. Afterward, he explained what was troubling him most was the wicked irony of this turn of events.

He'd spent the best years of his life working and saving and at the pinnacle of his career when he was preparing to enjoy the fruits of his labor, the shocking discovery of cancer had ruined all his plans.

[24 : 21] I found it so difficult to comfort him. His mind was absorbed in the thought of the deceitfulness of the world which had played a prank of fate upon him. I was reminded of the words of the Persian poet Hafez, do not expect faithfulness from this world.

She is the bride of a thousand husbands. It's in our nature to shatter our dreams. James the Apostle advised, now listen, you who say today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.

Why? You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You're a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Wise are those who beat the world at its own deceptive game.

They give rather than grab, lay down rather than take up. They do not believe its lies are not led astray by its allurements of mirage upon mirage. Blessed are those who act before they are robbed of all they have.

They invest what they can while they can where no thief can reach, especially the greatest of all bandits, death itself. This dear man was caught off guard because he had not prepared for the inevitable.

[25 : 38] Beside comforting him and feeling sad for him, there was very little I could do other than earnestly plead with him in this trying hour of his life while there was still time to flee into the arms of God.

Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near. The striking thing about the man in Jesus' parable was that according to the values and perspective of our world, he was no fool.

In fact, he was very wise and very prudent. But what Jesus is telling us here is something absolutely revolutionary because it's the very opposite of what our culture and society screams at us day in and day out.

The world says store up, accumulate, look after number one. Jesus says empty your barns, give it away, look out for others. The world tells us that to be someone you have to grab for all you can get.

Jesus says to find yourself, you must lose yourself. The world says be assertive, push yourself forward. Jesus says to obtain real honor, you must humble yourself.

[26 : 54] The world says indulge yourself, satisfy your desires. Jesus says to find real joy, you must repent and believe the gospel. The world says push your way to the top of the tree.

Jesus says to exercise real power, you must be a servant. The world says accumulate, grab, store it up for yourself. Jesus says to have real riches, you must give.

Empty your barns and follow me. And that's the way the gospel works. Jesus came with all his spiritual riches. He gave them away.

Remember Paul's words to Corinthians 8, 9, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich. Jesus Christ gave up everything that we might enjoy the wealth and riches of a relationship with God. And the world says, Jesus, you're a fool.

[28 : 00] But in the foolishness of the cross, Jesus conquered through losing. He gained through giving. He received honor and glory through shame and through disgrace.

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection proved the very truth of what he is saying here. He had no money. He had no earthly power. He had no home, no publicity, no advertising, no big organization behind him.

And yet he became the most influential man to ever walk this earth. What are you going to do with Jesus tonight? I don't know if you know the story about the junior devils having their final exam before a senior devil.

And the great question was this, what are you going to say to human beings? What will you whisper into their minds to divert them from faith in Jesus Christ? The first devil said, I plan, sir, to tell them there is no God.

The devil master said, they will not believe you. Their work tells them that every single human being, no matter how he disguises it, knows deep down there is a God.

[29 : 16] The second one came in and he said, we've heard one answer. What is your answer? He said, I'm going to tell them that there is no judgment. The senior devil said, we've tried that many a time, but we know that we can never silence the guilty consciences that remind them, that break into their settled lives to disturb them and tell them that there is a judgment.

It won't work. The third junior devil came in. The master devil said to him, have you got a better plan than to tell them there is no God or tell them there is no judgment?

And this one said, sir, I plan to tell them there is no hurry. And that, the master said, will work.

There is no hurry. Take your time. No need for urgency. Friend, do not delay. Do not put off giving your life to Jesus Christ because none of us are promised tomorrow.

one day your soul will be required of you. One day you will see and understand the deceitfulness of this life.

[30 : 27] This life that can never satisfy the human soul. And you will see it in heaven or you will see it in what the Bible calls hell. Yes, Jesus Christ spoke a great deal about money and wealth and possessions, not because he wanted it for himself.

Jesus doesn't want your money. He wants far more than that. He wants your whole life. His astonishing claim is that you are only truly rich when he is most valued, when he is Lord, when he is master.

Because then money and possessions and things begin to lose their powerful grip on our hearts.

They lose their hold on our lives. For Jesus says, when I come into your life, I'll set you free.

Give your life away to me and you will have real life, eternal life. The missionary martyr Jim Elliot once wrote, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Give your life, your soul to Jesus Christ this evening. And so be able to declare with the hymn writer, riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise, thou mine inheritance, now and always, thou and thou only, first in my heart, high King of heaven, my treasure, thou art.

[32 : 06] let's pray together. God, our Father, we pray that you would keep us from being blinded and deceived by the lies of this world that make us think that this world is everything, that money and possessions, while good things, are not everything.

you are everything. Help us to give our lives to you through our Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to enjoy a true inheritance and real riches, not in ourselves, but in him.

Lord, help us to live for you, to use what you have given us to honor you, to serve you, and to serve others. Help us to love you and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And so live faithfully as your disciples in this world. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.