

**From the Pulpit of
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A Parable About Wealth?

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Luke 12:13-21

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One day a man decided he wanted to go to the beach. So he gathered his things and started carrying what he thought he needed to enjoy his day at the beach. There was a beach umbrella, a nice beach chair, a cooler with his lunch and cold beverages, and his beach towel. He had a nice radio/CD player with him, as well as some CD's. He was all set for his day at the beach. While he was there, he saw some friends, and a couple of them came over to him and invited him to play volleyball with them. Can you see this happening on Siesta Key beach? He appreciated the invitation, but he said no. He had all these things around him, and he didn't want to leave the things while he went off to play. So he decided to decline the invitation of his friends because he had all this stuff, and was afraid that someone might take some of his stuff while he was away. I wonder if he enjoyed his time at the beach that day. And I wonder who owned what that day.

Did you know that Jesus talked more about money than he talked about eternal life? In fact, the only topic Jesus spoke about more than money was the kingdom of God. Money – how one made money, what one did with money, what money could do to a person – was a frequent theme for Jesus. There are some well-known biblical passages that make people cringe, like when Jesus says to the rich ruler, “Go, sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me.” Sell everything you have. That sounds pretty intimidating, doesn't it? And it makes it sound like Jesus was against wealth, which is something that could make many people in suburban American nervous.

We know that Jesus spent a lot of time with the poor and the outcast. We are told that Jesus had no possessions. We think that means that Jesus had an affinity for the poor, and that could mean that Jesus had something against the rich, that he didn't like the rich. Keep in mind, though, that Jesus was friends not just with the poor but with people of means – it was people who had some means that supported him in his ministry. He went not just to the homes of the poor for a meal, but he would often go to the homes of the rich as well. Jesus was not anti-wealth. Jesus was not anti-rich. He did talk a lot about idolatry. And Jesus was anti-greed.

That's really what this parable that we often call the parable of the rich fool is about. At the beginning of the passage, we see that someone shouts out to Jesus, “Teacher, bid my brother divide the family inheritance between us.” In that day, it was understood that the older brother would receive 2/3 of the estate, and everyone else would split the 1/3 that was left. Remember that when you think about the parable of the Prodigal Son. So it is a fair assumption that the person who shouted out to Jesus was saying, “Teacher, I'm the younger brother, and the inheritance thing isn't fair.” It is likely that it wasn't fair. It is possible that Jesus would agree that it wasn't fair. But Jesus didn't come to be a forerunner to Judge Judy or any other TV reality show judge. He was about the bigger picture. After Jesus said he shouldn't be asked to be a judge in such matters, he talked not so much about wealth as he talked about greed – “be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” It may well be that Jesus didn't want to get into a conversation about which brother's greed was more acceptable; maybe both were caught up in greed.

The man in the parable sounds a lot like our man who went to the beach that day, doesn't he? In the parable the man is quite wealthy, but there is a sadness that is attached to him because he has no one with whom to sit down to dinner, no one with whom to share in a conversation, no one with whom to consult about all the goods and crops. Our guy at the beach was so caught up in his stuff that he could not spend time with his friends who invited him to participate in their game. The stuff got in the way of living.

So the question I would ask today is, "What defines you as a person?" For some people, it is the kind of car they drive, or their address, or the size house in which they live. For some it is their financial portfolio. For some people, what defines them is if they are able to hold a position of power and prestige and status in the business world, or in government. For some people, it is where they stand on a social ladder compared with others they know. Many people seem to be defined by their things, their possessions, their stuff.

This all stands in contrast to Jesus' words about humility and being a servant. We are in a culture where attaining things is a primary goal for many people, and we are in a culture where attaining power is a primary goal for many people. One of the disturbing things taking place around this country right now is the rise of what is being called Christian Nationalism. The other night I heard a news clip from someone who is an advisor to a political candidate, saying that his understanding of being a Christian nationalist was that Jews were not included, that people of color were not included, that the United States was for white, Christian (I guess that means his version of what Christian means, not what the Scriptures say) people. Whatever you think of the politics of that – and I find it reprehensible and idolatrous – he is also saying that his identity, that what defines him, is his being white. Not that he is first a Christian, but that he is white. That is what defines him.

Jesus would argue that kind of thinking. Paul would argue that kind of thinking, especially if we remember Paul's words in Galatians that "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."ⁱ What defines us is not skin color or political stance, not status or power, not the abundance of possessions, but being found in Christ, being "clothed" with Christ.

Fred Craddock tells the story of traveling with his wife in Tennessee many years ago. They stopped at a diner for a meal, and selected a table for two. Soon an old man came to their table, pulled up a chair, and started to talk to them. He said his name was Ben Hooper. He asked what Craddock did for a living. Craddock, hoping to be left alone, said, "I am a professor of homiletics at a theological seminary." "Oh," said the man, "a preacher. Well, let me tell you a preacher story." He went on to say that in his growing years he did not know who his father was, and that made him want to not associate with others. You know what they said back then about kids without fathers. He was shy; he was what we would consider to be backwards. But he went to church. He would always leave church during the last hymn so no one would speak to him, so no one could ask him who his parents were, so no one could ask "who's your daddy?". But one day the service was so good, the sermon was so good, the last hymn was so good, that he stayed through the end of the service. The crowd in the middle aisle didn't let him get out of the church as fast as he wanted to get out. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned and saw it was the preacher. "Hello, son," he said. "What's your name? Who's your daddy?" He didn't know what to say; he didn't know how to answer. And the preacher said, "Wait a minute. I know who you are. I know who your daddy is. You, son, are a child of God." Then he said, "and that is my preacher story." And with that, the man got up from the table and left. The server came over to

the table and said, “Do you know who that was?” Craddock said, “He said his name was Ben Hooper.” “Yes,” said the woman. “Ben Hooper – he used to be the governor of Tennessee.”ⁱⁱ

Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Our homes or cars or bank accounts or jobs or color or gender or sexual orientation or position or power do not define us. We are children of God. What the man in the parable Jesus told, the “rich fool,” missed was knowing he was a child of God, called to be in relationship with other children of God. What our guy at the beach missed was being able to interact with others because his possessions really controlled him. What defines us is what God says about us – child of God. What defines us is what Jesus says about us – one for whom he is willing to go to a cross. What defines us is not what others say, or even what we say or want to achieve, or have achieved. What defines us is being a follower of Jesus, about whom Jesus says, “I know you. You are mine.”

Because of being in Christ, Paul says in Philippians, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have.”ⁱⁱⁱ He knew what defined him. May we all know what defines us as well.

Each one of us – *each one of us* – is a child of God.

ⁱ Galatians 3:28

ⁱⁱ I first heard this story told by Tony Campolo

ⁱⁱⁱ Philippians 4:11