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“The Tragic Tale of the Flourishing Farmer”

Sermon Series: Twice Told Tales: Parables for Skeptics

Scripture Lesson: *Luke 12:13-21*

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How much is enough? More is never enough.
Only Jesus Christ is enough. Let us pray.

Lord God, fill us with your Spirit this morning so that we would be satisfied only in your greatness and majesty. For we know You are enough. We pray this in Jesus Christ. Amen.

The question to which I think this parable lends itself is, “How much is enough?” You may have heard the phrase—usually on bumper stickers—“He who dies with the most toys wins.” We may smirk at the simple hedonism there, but it really speaks to an all too human tendency to find our life and our abundance from things, rather than from God. Most of us know that money cannot buy peace or happiness. But a little bit extra sure wouldn’t hurt. How much is enough?

This parable comes right in the middle of a series of teachings which Christ was laying down on the people. Luke tells us that thousands of people had gathered to hear Christ, and that they were so excited about hearing what He had to say that they were trampling all over one another.

Jesus barely gets started with his expert teaching and someone from the crowd yells out, “*Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.*” *Luke 12:13* Before we even get started, this little episode reveals two things about Jesus’ character. First, you cannot interrupt God. God does not have anything better to do. God is not uninterested. God is not distracted. God always

has the time if we do. Secondly, God sees through our questions. We cannot be disingenuous with God. He knows us too well. Jesus saw through the greed in this man’s question right away. He immediately knew that this man is trying to get permission to break the law, which said very clearly that the firstborn son received twice what the other sons were to receive. Notice here how Jesus did not answer his question directly, but instead took the step of pointing out that this man did not have a heart for God. He used a parable to do it.

Jesus said there was a rich man whose land produced plentifully. It produced so plentifully that he had no place to store his abundance. So he tore down his old barns to build bigger barns to store up all his goods. And when this process was complete, when he finally rested from his labors, he said to his soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years take your ease, eat, drink be merry.” But immediately as the man had everything set up and gained his rest, he died. God said to Him, “*Fool!* (which is synonymous in Scripture with calling someone evil.) *This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*” Jesus finished the parable by saying, “*So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.*”

Now I don’t know about you, but I read this story and I get a little weak in the knees. I get a little weak in the knees because when I hear about this rich man, I see myself. And I don’t

only see myself, I see the mode by which our entire society operates and I, for one, have bought into it. The rich man's fields produced abundantly. He saved his abundance so that he could retire and be at ease, so that he could spend his days eating, drinking and being merry. Isn't our entire culture set up like this? Jen and I, like many of you, have a couple of financial accounts where we set aside some money a couple of times every month. This money is set aside with the idea that it will grow and someday we will be able to rest from our labors and eat, drink, take long vacations, drive a big car, and be merry. Our home here in Overland Park is our fourth home. Each home we have lived in has been bigger than the last. That kind of thing is just expected. When Calvin was born we bought a bigger car. Bigger is better, right?

Let me tell you what this sermon is not. This sermon is not an attempt to beat up on people for having bigger homes, or retirement accounts, or just being rich. There's nothing wrong with being rich. Compared to the rest of the world, I would suspect that all the people in this room are rich. The Biblical evidence is that Christ had a few wealthy followers, including Mary Magdalene. In the Old Testament Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and Job were all wealthy.

But all of us who are wealthy need to be aware that our wealth can be an impediment to our relationship with God. Scripture teaches us that it is difficult to be rich and follow God. *Mark 10:23* "And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And this parable today illustrates perfectly why it is so difficult for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God. Material wealth is not a problem, but it can create problems for our relationship with God if we believe that more will ever be enough.

The rich man had two problems. First, he had a pronoun problem. Listen to all the first person

possessives he used in this parable: my crops, my barns, my grains, my soul. It's that last one that I think really got under Christ's skin—my soul. It was also apparent that this man believed that the land which produced so plentifully deserved a "my" in front of it as well. The word "my" for human beings is a problem. Why? It's a problem because Scripture tells us that everything in this world—including everything we believe we own—belongs to God.

1 Chronicles 29:11 teaches, "All that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours O Lord." Put a little sticky note right here in your brain because we will spend a lot of time on this concept in the next sermon series. I have become very conscious recently of the word "my" and how often I use it. It's really startling: my car, my home, my wife, my son, my office, my books, my DVDs, my gym membership, my baseball cards, my bicycle, my X Box, my life, my Church. The word "my" may be convenient shorthand, but the problem is that it reinforces the very sinful idea in our head that we are Lord over some areas of our life, rather than God. There is simply nothing in this world which God does not own, except our sin—and even then, He will own it if we simply turn it over to Him.

A statement called the Barmen Declaration, written in 1933 by Christians in Germany against the Nazi government which was claiming ultimate authority, "We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas in our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords..." The great Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper said, "In the total expanse of human life there is not a single square inch of which the Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not declare, 'That is mine!'"

When I was about five years old my family sponsored a family from Vietnam after Saigon fell. This family had fourteen people, a mother and father, 2 grandparents, and 10 children. They lived in our garage for about a month while they found jobs and a home in Kansas City. As a five-year-old, it was one of the best

months of my life because I suddenly had ten round the clock playmates who had been instructed by their parents to take care of that little American boy whose parents were taking care of us. I was a little like the King of Siam, literally. A few days before the family moved out to begin their new life in earnest, the mother and father came and spoke with my mother and father. They proceeded to tell my Mom and Dad that their family owed their very existence to them. They went on to say that they owed a debt which they could never repay. “But,” they said, “To show you our thanks, we would like for you to have our youngest daughter. We would like for you to adopt her and take her as your own.” My Mother and Father, after some deep thought, politely and graciously declined. That family’s testimony of gratitude has always stayed with me. Today it teaches me to be careful what I call mine.

The rich man also had a perception problem. He believed life was held together by what is on the outside, rather than the inside.

There are two basic kinds of skeletons in the animal kingdom—endoskeleton and exoskeleton. An exoskeleton is what a bug possesses. Their body is held together on the outside. They have a tough outer shell which holds things together. Their exterior, in essence, is a little like a suitcase in which they carry around their life.

Most living thing besides bugs, including human beings, possess an endoskeleton. Their body and their life is held together on the inside. An endoskeleton has a couple of advantages over an exoskeleton. An exoskeleton is more primitive. Animals with exoskeletons don’t get too far up the food chain. They don’t rank very highly in the animal kingdom. The biggest one around is a crab or a lobster.

Second, animals with an exoskeleton have a really hard time growing. In order to grow in size they have to shed their old skeleton and grow a new one. During that time they are particularly weak and vulnerable.

I think what Christ is driving at here with this parable is that we need to have an endoskeleton rather than an exoskeleton. In other words, what holds our life together—what gives us security and stability—must be on the inside rather than the outside. If we look to things on the outside to hold life together, we will find ourselves to be spiritually primitive and we won’t rank very highly in God’s kingdom. We’ll be something like a spiritual crab.

In addition, when we have an exoskeleton, when we allow what is on the outside to hold our life together, we don’t grow much, spiritually speaking. If we allow, say, pork chops or doughnuts to hold our life together, we may find ourselves growing a lot. But I am talking about growing spiritually.

Howard Hughes was a billionaire. He was world famous, lauded in the press. He dated Hollywood starlets. He made movies and was a daredevil who lived a life which most could only dream about. Yet in his latter days, his life utterly fell apart. He spent most of his days in a darkened room, addicted to codeine. He did not bathe or trim his hair or nails. He did not brush his teeth to the point that they rotted out of his head. He sometimes spent hours laying in his own filth. The smell around him was nearly intolerable. A biographer I read said that Howard Hughes root problem was not mental illness, but that he made himself captive to what was on the outside. “...image meant everything to him...He wanted the world to notice and to marvel at what it saw. He wanted to show others that he was every bit the man his father had been.”¹ Hughes could perhaps convince the world that he was a marvel, but he couldn’t convince himself.

Here is the problem. What if we look inside—we take a good hard look at our endoskeletal structure—and we see that it is not in very good shape. There’s a great episode of the show *Seinfeld* where Elaine and Jerry are talking about Jerry’s cantankerous neighbor, Newman, who has recently done something surprising. Elaine says, “Perhaps there is more to Newman than

meets the eye?” Jerry responds, “No, there’s less. I’ve looked into his soul. He’s pure evil.” What if we look into our soul where we believe there should be more and we find less. Our spiritual endoskeleton is cracked here and fractured there, and we haven’t been drinking enough spiritual milk so our density is not what it should be. Where do we turn? What do we do?

Jesus ended this parable by saying that we should lay up treasure for ourselves, but we should be rich toward God. How do we do that?

John’s gospel tells us that Jesus said if we want to have a rich, full, abundant life, we should look to Him.

“So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds, he also will live because of me.” John 6:53-57

If we want to be rich in the way that matters...if we want to have a secure future...if we want to have joy and abundance...if we want to really know the full measure of life—we will feast on and find our self-worth in His love.

How much is enough? More is never enough. Only Jesus Christ is enough.

¹Donald L. Barlett and James Steele, *Howard Hughes: His Life and Madness* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2004) p. 622.