

Title: *Barns or Blessings?*

Text: Luke 12:13-21

Who is that person you look at and say, “They are really blessed?” It may be too easy and too much of a caricature to look at someone like Bill Gates or Warren Buffett and say, “They are really blessed.” I don’t know Warren Buffett’s heart, nor do I know Bill Gates’ heart, but I do know that Gates has basically said, “Church isn’t worth my time.” I’m not passing judgment here. Doesn’t mean that he isn’t open to God’s leading in his life. That’s just his view of “church”.

Maybe the better question would be is wealth necessarily **the** sign of God’s blessing? Maybe you’ve known someone in this church or in a past church who seemed to have the Midas touch. They were a beautiful couple with beautiful kids who lived in a beautiful home and drove a beautiful car and they served beautifully in the church and it seemed that everything they touched turned out beautifully.

What if his business went bankrupt? Would you still say they’re blessed? What if the husband had a heart attack or their child was severely injured in a car wreck? Would you say they’re blessed then?

What about the hard-driving business man who has made it to the top through sheer ruthlessness and determination. His bank account is overflowing. His stock portfolio is doing well, but his family’s a wreck and he keeps a bottle of gin in his bottom desk drawer to help him make it through the day. Would you say that he’s blessed?

What about a widow who lives in a small 4-room house who doesn’t have much, but her children and grandchildren adore her, they enjoy being together and there’s nothing they wouldn’t do for her. Is she blessed?

Why is it that we so often judge blessings by the size of our bank account? What is that hole in your heart or that ache in your soul that you say if it were filled or soothed, you would consider yourself blessed.

We do live in a materialistic culture where we glorify the lifestyles of the rich and famous and hope that our champagne wishes and caviar dreams can come true. If you’re a child of God though and you realize that for a child who lives in a garbage dump and scrounges for other people’s cast-offs for their very survival, their champagne wish may be a peanut butter and jelly sandwich made with fresh bread. For a child who lives in a poor village in the Sudan, their caviar dream may be simply for clean running water, if they can even conceive of such. For a poor child in India, a bowl of oatmeal would be enough to make them think they’ve died and gone to heaven.

I say that not to make us feel guilty for having the stuff that we have, but to challenge our understanding of what it is to be blessed, how God has blessed us and what he expects us to do with His blessing. How many of us, if we could just get to the point of

having enough money to kick back, do what we want to do and enjoy life would feel like we're really blessed? If we could just get some sort of a windfall that would pay off all of our bills and get us out of debt, we'd be sitting pretty. Maybe that's why so many families get so twisted up and sideways when it comes to the inheritance and getting what we think ought to be coming to us from somebody's estate.

There is no limit to what some people will do for money. In an attempt to collect 40,000 euros (\$44,780) in insurance payments, a 58-year-old German landscape gardener had a friend cut off his thumb and forefinger with a chainsaw.

According to authorities, the gardener held onto a cutting board while his accomplice, a 28-year-old trucker, sawed off his friend's fingers. The gardener then threw the severed digits away before claiming money from two different insurance companies. The police arrested both men after one of them was overheard bragging about the ruse.

Both men were convicted in a Wuerzburg, Germany, courtroom. The eight-fingered gardener was given a probationary sentence of one-and-a-half-years, while his chainsaw-wielding accomplice (because of a previous criminal record) received a jail sentence.

Isn't it tragic when a family gets embroiled in a big, ugly fight over dividing up their parents' estate? It happens in our day, maybe it's happened in your family or in your extended family and it happened in Jesus' day as well.

Jesus has been warning his disciples about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and telling them not to be that way. He's talking about serious matters of how does God really want us to live. There's a crowd around and everyone in the crowd, to one extent or another has their own agenda. You can imagine people in the crowd edging past others and pushing people out of their way and an elbow here and an elbow there trying to get close enough to Jesus to ask him a question.

This man doesn't have any question about theology or the nature of God or how to live a truly meaningful life. Instead, he has his own little squabble with his brother over the estate. He wants Jesus to intervene. The first question we may ask in all due respect is, what makes this any of Jesus' concern? What gives him jurisdiction? If Jesus renders an opinion, what makes this man sure that his brother will even listen to him?

There are some scriptural principles in the books of Moses which would govern how an inheritance should be handled. In Numbers 27, Moses was told, "Say to the Israelites, 'If a man dies and leaves no son, turn his inheritance over to his daughter. ⁹ If he has no daughter, give his inheritance to his brothers. ¹⁰ If he has no brothers, give his inheritance to his father's brothers. ¹¹ If his father had no brothers, give his inheritance to the nearest relative in his clan, that he may possess it. This is to be a legal requirement for the Israelites, as the LORD commanded Moses.'"

The man may have had more legitimate needs than his brother if you want to look at it that way. He may have had a claim to the money that was not at all unreasonable, but have you ever known someone who had a grudge against someone and the whole purpose of their existence seemed to lie in convincing everyone else how right they were and how wrong the other person was? Have you ever known anyone who was so totally focused on money that they couldn't ever think of anything else? Everything had a price tag on it.

Jesus had that amazing way of being able to look right into people's souls and know what was really going on with them. He asked the man a question that kind of puts him in his place. He said, "Man, who appointed me a judge or arbiter in this case." The way he said, "Man," was not exactly the most polite and deferential way he could address the man's concern. It's almost like we might say, "Hey, Pal, or hey mac, why is this any of my concern?"

He cuts right to the heart of the matter when he says, "Your life will not necessarily be better because you have this additional inheritance. Your life doesn't consist in the abundance of possessions." Have you ever had the experience of wanting something really badly and getting it and finding out that it wasn't all it cracked up to be? Sometimes we get what we think we want but along with it, we get leanness in our souls. We talk a lot about the Christmas blues. There are a lot of reasons for it. They primarily all center around unmet expectations. Sometimes it's because we got what we wanted but it wasn't what we thought it would be.

So to illustrate the point, Jesus told a parable. He's not exactly telling about an actual person that he knows but he is telling a story with enough truth that people can easily believe that there is someone like this man. A parable is a story in which the details are presented in such a way that we have to think. There's something about it that sinks its hooks into our mind and we just can't let go.

Jesus said, "There was a certain man. His ground produced a great crop." He had a bumper harvest. Perhaps he had had two or three years of bumper harvests and had more grain than he knew what to do with. When you have an abundance or you have more than you need, what do you do?

This man decided that he would just tear down his barns and build bigger barns. This is his opportunity to kick back, relax and enjoy the fruit of the earth. He could say to himself, "I've got everything I'll ever need. It's time for me to eat, drink and be merry." What he didn't realize was that his life wasn't entirely in his own hands. That life, death would come calling for him and what good are all of those barns full of grain that he had hoarded. Who were the heirs who would get in a fight over what he had left behind? Jesus gives the punch line to whole story when he says, "So this is how it is with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

As always, there is more to learn when you beneath the layers of the parable. The deeper you go and the more you sink your teeth into it, the more it sinks its teeth into you. You have to love the way Jesus tells the story. He says, the ground of a certain rich

man produced a large crop. A couple of details stick out here. One, this man is already rich. He already has an ample supply of this world's goods but for whatever reason, what he had wasn't enough.

I've never been one to engage in class warfare or to demonize people who have been successful. I don't begrudge them their wealth if they've come by it honestly. If you want to talk about trust-fund kids who think they hit a triple because they were born on 3rd base, that's something else. Every year Forbes magazine publishes their list of the world's wealthiest people. To reach the top of the Forbes richest Americans list, you have to have billions. One of these billionaires, Ted Turner, says the magazine's ranking makes them want to get even richer: "You're on this list, you see, and you want to move up the list. You want to be number one."

What can you buy with \$12 Billion that you can't buy with \$8Billion? There's nothing except status and security. Tim Keller has a helpful teaching about our love of money. Scripture doesn't say "Money is the root of all evil." I Timothy 6:10 says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." We can make money what Keller calls a surface idol. That's the thing we go after and on the surface, it looks like that's what we're really after, but if you probe deeper, our real idol is one of either two things – status and security. Ted Turner can want to move up on the list of richest Americans, not because he needs any more money or there's some material item that he can't afford. He wants to move up to have the status of ranking above someone else.

Maybe we think, "If I can amass a big enough bank account, I can pay off my bills and if my employer wants to fire me, let him." If I have enough in my bank account, I will have security. Isn't it interesting that we call our retirement program **Social Security**? Nothing wrong with wanting to be secure. Most of us are either security seekers or risk takers. Not to overgeneralize, but usually, women desire security and men are more willing to take risks. It would be an interesting psychological study to analyze risk-taking in men and determine whether they are willing to take risks during one season of life, so that down the road, they may experience the pay-off that will bring them extra security.

Nothing wrong with wanting to have security, provided we recognize where our true security comes from. It's not in our bank account, the equity in our home, our 401K, the kind of car we drive. It's in God. God is our security. Our security is found in trusting him and in his love and grace and care for us.

Notice how the man in the parable gives no acknowledgment of that at all. It's significant also to point out that it doesn't say that the man worked particularly hard to produce this great harvest. It just said the ground produced a great harvest. He is just the recipient of the bounty of the Earth. In that respect, you could say he was blessed. He landed on a good piece of land that was very fruitful and fertile and productive. What he didn't realize was that he had been blessed so that he could pass that blessing along to

someone else. Maybe that fertile land was just something that had been entrusted to him as a stewardship and he thought that it was really his. He was completely self-absorbed.

Notice the pronouns he uses, "Then he said, 'This is what **I'll** do. **I** will tear down **my** barns and build bigger ones, and there **I** will store all **my** grain and **my** goods.'¹⁹ And **I'll** say to **myself**, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" Everything that he has been blessed with is an excuse for him just to indulge himself." Even when he says "you" it's only because he's talking to himself.

We may look at that and say, "It's sure nice to have that kind of money." God looks at him and says, "You fool!" How could you get it so wrong? Who do you think shows more wisdom and firmer grasp on the meaning of life – Paris Hilton or Mother Teresa? One epitomizes a self-indulgent lifestyle of just doing whatever money can buy and afford you the opportunity to do and the other epitomizes selfless service. Who is more blessed Paris Hilton or Mother Teresa?

Mother Teresa also epitomized what it means to be rich toward God. What is that? She knew what true wealth really was. It was in the opportunities we have to be used by God to do for somebody who couldn't do for you or for themselves. It's opening yourself up to his purpose and recognizing that you are a steward for him of everything that you've been given to use for his glory.

In response to a recent UNICEF study that showed American teens near the bottom of nations surveyed in terms of happiness and fulfillment, William Falk of The Week magazine responded:

It would be comforting to shrug off the report as pure anti-American bunkum. But as the parent of a teen and a tween, I cannot. I've seen firsthand the emptiness that haunts so many middle-class kids. From an early age, they are taught that life is a pitiless pursuit of individual gratification and success, requiring above-average brains and above-average looks. There is no sense of context, or community, or higher purpose. It's hardly surprising that so many of them are taking antidepressants, ADHD meds, or other pills. Many more hide their sadness in eating disorders, drugs, or meaningless hookups. In our rush to give our children everything, I'm afraid, we have forgotten to help them answer a question that won't be ignored: *What is this all for?*

Preached at Salem Avenue. August 21,2011