



Roanoke, Virginia

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“A Better Barn”

Luke 12:13-21

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13 Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ 14But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ 15And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ 16Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” 18Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” 20But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” 21So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’

On November 27, 1895, Alfred Nobel signed his last will and testament at Paris’ Swedish-Norwegian Club. History.com¹ wrote an article about the origins of the infamous awards that bear his name. The 62-year-old industrialist had previously contemplated using some of his personal

¹ Evan Andrews, “Did a Premature Obituary Inspire the Nobel Prize?” written December 9, 2016; updated July, 23 2020. <https://www.history.com/news/did-a-premature-obituary-inspire-the-nobel-prize>



fortune to support the work of scientists and inventors, but the document Nobel produced described a project far more ambitious than anyone could have imagined. In fewer than 1,000 handwritten words, Nobel outlined a plan to devote the vast majority of his estate—worth around \$265 million today—to a series of prizes for “those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind.” He listed 5 awards in his will (a sixth award, for economics, was added later in 1968): three awards were for the greatest discoveries or inventions in the fields of physics, chemistry, and medicine; a fourth was devoted to the author of the “most outstanding work” of literature; the fifth award was designated for “the person who shall have done the most or the best work for peace.”

While these awards would eventually grow famous across the globe, there was no denying that Alfred Nobel was an unlikely source for a peace prize. One historian noted that Nobel’s family name was “associated not with the arts of peace but with the arts of war.” Alfred Nobel owned an armaments manufacturer, developed new types of explosives utilizing the unstable power nitroglycerin, and later invented dynamite. Certainly, an unlikely source for a peace prize!

So why did the “dynamite king” hand over his fortune to peace and prosperity?

Well, in 1888, Alfred Nobel opened his newspaper and read his own obituary entitled “The Merchant of Death is Dead.” You see, Alfred’s brother Ludvig had died in France from a heart attack, and thanks to poor reporting, at least one French newspaper believed that it was Alfred who had died. It proceeded to write a scathing obituary that branded Alfred as the “merchant of death” who had built a fortune by developing new ways to kill. Alfred would live 8 more years after the obituary was written.

Imagine reading your own obituary. What do you believe will be the words about how you lived your life?

I remember an exercise in my University 101 course my first year in college where we had to write our own obituary. I can’t remember exactly what I wrote, but I do remember the challenge and the vulnerability that went into it. But I can’t imagine the intrusive uneasiness felt reading someone else’s words about you.

Imagine reading your own obituary and learning that you would be remembered in such a negative way! Would it make you change your ways?

Well, it did for Alfred Nobel. According to biographer Kenne Fant, Nobel “became so obsessed with his posthumous reputation that he rewrote his last will, bequeathing most of his fortune to a cause upon which no future obituary writer would be able to cast aspersions.”

I wonder if Jesus’ parable functions a bit like Nobels obituary for us.



While teaching his disciples, Jesus is confronted by a question regarding inheritance. Fighting over inheritance is a common problem in all societies and cultures. And, if an estate plan is not properly laid out, it often leads to stress and strain for the surviving family members. The man asks Jesus to intervene with his brother to give him his share of the inheritance. It was common in first-century Palestine for Jews to ask rabbis for a legal ruling.² In asking Jesus to be a mediator in the family affair, the man must have thought of Jesus as a respected rabbi, one who had influence over people, and one who he thought could convince his brother to give him his share of the inheritance. Jesus refuses, however, to enter the family squabble and instead uses the situation to further his teaching about the seduction of wealth. Jesus issues a warning about greed and supports his teaching with the parable of the rich fool.

What was wrong with the brother's request in the first place?

What is the issue with wanting your share of the family inheritance?

And in response to the parable, what is so foolish about saving for the future?

Why is building a bigger barn a bad thing when there is so much uncertainty about tomorrow?

These questions often sit front and center as the text comes through the lectionary, and as preachers sometimes shy away from the punch that is thrown into the face of our consumerism. The difficulty or should I say the challenge here is that Jesus exposes our human greed and anxiety about money and then employs the parable to singe away any illusion that the godly life is synonymous with the American ideal of prosperity and success. In our culture, we have idolized money as blessing, as fortune, as the means for happiness, and as security we gain for ourselves. Yet, conversations about money have seemingly become taboo in the very same culture. We are more comfortable talking about sex than money. Maybe it is because money is always about more than money. Edwin Friedman and Peter Steinke, in their work on family systems, help illustrate that money matters often reveal the true heart of any organization, churches included, as well as of our individual households.³ Our spending, our saving, our benevolences (if any), and our general attitude toward material wealth are all invested with emotions and memories. And money matters are not simple matters. This is why, in every premarital counseling session, I always ask the couple to tell me what messages about money they received from their family growing up. And I also ask, how would you go about making decisions about money once you are married?

² Henry Mugabe, "Parable of the Rich Fool: Luke 12:13-21," *SAGE* 111, no. 1 (2014): 69.



This is where I want to focus our attention. The parable does confront our material greed and our lack of trust in the providential care of God’s abundance, as well as our constant need of more!

But what is striking about this parable, as one commentator points out, is the fact that the man makes his decision all by himself.⁴ The man, who certainly does not *work* the land, has a conversation with himself, and after the renovation plan is decided, he permits *his* soul to bask in *his* abundance, to sit back, drink up, and be merry! The man doesn’t realize though that his time on earth has come to end. This will be his last night to gaze at his wealth before his stored-up treasures will be left sitting in those newly constructed barns, likely to be divided and depleted.

Sitting on more-than-enough, the man talks with himself. He doesn’t talk with anyone else about how to handle his abundance. He didn’t call on his family to ask what he should do. In fact, no family is mentioned at all in the parable. He didn’t reach out to friends for advice. He doesn’t stop and pray and seek guidance from God. The relentless use of the first-person pronouns “I” and “my”—used 11 times in 3 verses—reveal the egocentric nature of the man. As one commentator puts it: “The farmer has fallen prey to worshipping the most popular of gods: the Unholy Trinity of ‘me, myself, and I.’”⁵

The foolishness of the man comes in his selfishness. There is no thought about giving some of his abundance away to those in need, no expression of gratitude for his good fortune, no recognition of God at all. He never once considers allowing his fields to be gleaned—offering those without land to come behind and gather what they may need. He never once considers offering a bonus to the farmers who actually work his land.

But only one option came to mind in his self-to-self conversation. Confronted with the happy problem of a bumper crop, with no thought of God or neighbor, or alien or widow, or orphan, or any other whose lives are at risk due to their limited access, he concludes that the answer is to tear down his barns stuffed-to-the-brim, to build even bigger barns for his crops and other possessions.

I wonder what this tells us about dealing with our own abundance.

Who is at the table when decision need to be made about how we spend, invest, give, and save?

As stewardship seasons come and go each year, and churches develop and approve budgets, who do you think is at the table? Is all of the conversation internal or do we seek guidance from those outside of our community? Do we talk only with ourselves, or do we seek advice from those

⁴ Rev. Dr. Millie Snyder, “Looking into the Lectionary” for the *Presbyterian Outlook*, July 25, 2022.

⁵ David Lose, “Stewardship Season, Already?” commentary on Luke 12:13-21 for *Working Preacher*, Aug. 1, 2010.



on the margins of society? Do we seek God's will for our church abundance? Do we ask the outsiders, the neighbors, and the community leaders to hear what they might suggest? Who is at the table? And who is not at the table and needs to be?

As long as we only talk with ourselves, what we do with money will reflect our conveniences and our preferences.

I will say, as the staff liaison to the Service and Outreach Committee, we are doing a pretty good job reaching out to see where the need may be in our community. We seek updates and guidance from our mission partners, and even those we do not support in our budget, to gain understanding about how our money decisions may affect those we serve, those we love, and those we share life with—known and unknown.

And on August 28th, we will celebrate the Mission Build Campaign and the 1.7 million dollars raised for mission alone.

But with all the excess at the center of the man's life, he plunged into the trap of idolatry, an idolatry that is often idolized by our culture. We are constantly confronted by the message that life indeed consists in the abundance of possessions and that you must have more to be more. We are encouraged to supersize and to maximize; you need to upgrade in order to be upscale. A trap that is easy to fall into.

The question to ask is: Are our desires and standards for what is enough driven by a determination to store up treasures for our own pleasure thinking only of ourselves, or by our understanding of God's blessings and our covenant purpose to bless others? (Gen. 12:2)

And as we continue to make decision about money in our nation, in our city, in our church, and in our families, who do we need to invite to be part of the conversation that isn't currently heard? Whose voice should be valued that is left sitting off to the side?

To the man in the parable, a bigger barn was the answer. But that very night his life was being demanded of him. His obituary might have been entitled "Barn Man Dies a Bare Man." Or he could have changed his ways, much like Alfred Nobel did, to use his abundance to build a better barn, one that was open and charitable, offering his abundance to those in want. Perhaps then his obituary read "Rich Man Turned Rich Toward God."

Instead of banking on more barns and larger barns, God invites us all, rich and poor, into the eternal economy of grace and mercy.

Because what would it profit you to gain the world yet lose your soul.

Amen.

