

“Things Above”

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:2, NIV).

“One’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). Jesus spoke these words over 2,000 years ago, and yet, his rebuke is more relevant than ever. We are a people of abundant possessions, and as I taught on this text last week, one of the people in my Bible class illustrated this by talking about the proliferation of self-storage units. I thought he made a great point, so I did some digging and found out that over the last four years, the annual revenue for self-storage in our country grew by 13%, which means that in 2024, people in the United States spent over \$44 billion to store their stuff. I also learned that 90 percent of the self-storage units in the world are located in the U.S., and, if that statistic isn’t shocking enough, 65 percent of people who use storage units in America also have a garage. Bigger barns indeed.

The abundance of possessions seems to make the world go around, and from the time we are old enough to understand the concept of possessing something, we resist contentment. In so many ways, our society is built on the need to feed the insatiable desire for more, and we often find ourselves struggling to be satisfied with what we have. So instead, we focus on accumulating the things of this world, and the abundance of possessions becomes the ultimate goal of life.

If you think about it from a spiritual perspective, at its root, this reliance on the stuff of the world is nothing more than a lack of faith. It is a failure to trust in God’s promises, and, at its most basic level, it is a rejection of the Bible’s teaching and the Creed’s confession that there is a “life of the world to come.” Covetousness is based on the lie that this life is all there is, that when we die, there is nothing more, and when we give in to this sinful impulse, we grab what we can, while we can, however we can, and we hoard it even as it destroys us.

Today’s Gospel reading addresses this basic human compulsion, and it begins with a simple question. Luke tells us that someone in the crowd approached Jesus seeking justice and said, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” We don’t know who the man was, and the details of his case are not disclosed, but this man saw Jesus as a rabbi who had the authority to render judgment on his dispute with his brother. And who knows, his case may have been a good one. From a legal standpoint, he may have had every right to stake a claim on the estate. Luke doesn’t tell us any more about the situation, but whether he was right or wrong, the man quickly learns that Jesus’ purpose was not to be a mediator of earthly justice, and Jesus says as much as He responds, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?”

These words carry a great irony because the truth is that there is no greater judge than Jesus! In John 5, Jesus said, “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son...²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:22, 27). Jesus answered the way He did, not to diminish His role as our ultimate Judge, but to make it clear that the things He judges have an eternal weight that transcends the trivial and temporary disputes of this life. So, before the man could muster a response, Jesus cut straight to the heart of the true

problem. “Be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

For Jesus, the earthly issues of fairness or legal right are nothing when compared to the eternal issues of the heart, and to make this point, Jesus told a parable: “The land of a rich man produced plentifully” (Luke 12:16). Now, before we go any further into the parable, we need to notice the reason for the good crop. The abundance this man was experiencing had nothing to do with him. His bumper crop wasn’t a result of his hard work or good life. It wasn’t a reward for wise decisions or shrewd management. This man was blessed by the God, who “causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). By the will and work of God, “the land” produced a good crop, and yet the man’s thoughts immediately turned inward. Listen to the pronouns as the story continues. The man 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, and 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, be merry.’” (Luke 12:17-19).

With a dozen personal pronouns packed into three verses, it’s clear that this rich man saw himself at the center of the story. He saw the abundance of his possessions as the “be all and end all,” and he used the blessings of God to satisfy his own desire for comfort and self-reliance. The point of Jesus’ parable becomes crystal clear as he concludes: “But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” (Luke 12:20).

In today’s reading from Ecclesiastes, King Solomon, who was one of the richest men in history and experienced all that life had to offer, wrote, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). In Hebrew, the word Solomon repeats here communicates the idea of a vapor that vanishes in the wind, and outside of a faith-filled life, the things of this world are just that. They are transient, they are temporary, and no matter how great they may appear or feel in the moment, they will quickly fade away. Yet, we are so often distracted by the details of our lives. We are consumed by the anxious striving for earthly things, and the hope of heaven is nothing more than a vague idea, detached from reality.

Today’s parable is for us, and make no mistake, the words Jesus speaks are meant to shake us out of our anxious striving, and jar us from our focus on earthly things, and drive our short-sighted and self-centered hearts to repentance. Today, in this simple story, God has convicted each and every one of us, so that today, to each and every one of us, He can proclaim His Word of grace. Today, in His forgiving Word, God has turned your gaze from earthly things and given you a vision of things eternal, and because of Him who is your sacrifice, Savior, and judge, you have died to sin, and you have been given new life. Today, God has set your mind on things above, your life is now hidden in Christ, and when He who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Go with the peace of this heavenly promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold