

Luke 12:13-21

Good morning Meadowbrooke, I'm Dan Nelson and I get to be your guest preacher this morning. For those of you who don't know me, I've been around Meadowbrooke for almost 11 years, first as an attender, then on staff full time as the executive pastor, then part time, then as an elder. I came off the elder board at the end of September, and now I serve as a member of the welcome team, and I work with our finance team. If you are looking for some low-key places to serve, welcome team and finance have some spots for you so come see me and I'll point you in the right direction.

If you are wondering why I am up here when Keith is here, it's because he and the staff went to a conference in Arizona this past week, and me preaching gave him a chance to enjoy the conference without the weight of preparing a sermon hanging over his time.

I went to this conference when I was on staff. It's three days of inspiration, education, and hanging out with other pastors you only get to see once a year at this conference. We kid them about going to Arizona and suffering for Jesus in the warm weather, but that's really not it. So, thank you for giving so I got to go in years past, they could go this year.

So here are a couple of visual aids to get us started. Does anybody know what this is?

How about this one?

Or this one?

These are graphs of the value of Tesla, Apple, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average for the past year.

Why Apple and Tesla? Because I own 3 shares of Apple, and 1 and 1/13 shares of Tesla. I hardly spend any time tracking their value, I just let them do whatever they do. But I know there are a lot of people who own stock and are very religious about tracking its value.

One morning, back in the day when you had to have a broker to buy and sell stock for you, my dad called his friend who was waiting for his broker to call him. His broker called him at the same time every morning on days the market was open. When my dad's friend realized it was my dad not his broker, he basically hung up on him.

You probably own some stock, too, because almost any kind of retirement plan is invested to some degree in the stock market. Mine is, and every quarter I get a report on the performance of my portfolio. It's been sad to watch the value go down over the past year or so when it had been going up.

I think all of us are more aware lately of what's happening with the stock market in particular, and with the overall economy in general, in the U.S. and in the world. It seems like every day there is a report on what's happening, and "up and to the right" usually isn't it. And so, we are concerned. We want our graph to go up and to the right.

About two thousand years ago this guy named Jesus came on the scene, and he had a lot to say about money and material wealth. In fact, he talked about that topic more than anything else, so I guess it is an important topic. And truth be told, it is one of my favorite topics to preach on. I am a satisfied customer of the Jesus Financial Management School.

I'm sure when you came to worship this morning you were not expecting a sermon on money. If you are tracking with Keith's preaching schedule, you probably thought you were going to hear a message on thy kingdom come thy will be done from the Sermon on the Mount. That's still coming next week.

But if you have been around the church very long, or are familiar with your Bible, you have probably heard and read all that I will say this morning. So, my apologies for being repetitive. But sometimes, even though we already know, we need reminding. We hear it then stash it away on a shelf somewhere in our brain where it doesn't get used. So, I hope this morning, whether you have heard it all before or you are hearing it for the first time, you will grab onto something and use it.

With that in mind, please stand as we read the words of Jesus from the 12th chapter of Luke's gospel, starting with verse 13.

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But Jesus didn't respond the way the guy expected - he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them - his disciples - "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, - for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." (Pause) And he told them a parable...

You may be seated, and please put your tray table in the upright and locked position and fasten your seatbelts and because we have a lot to cover in the next 25 minutes!

A bit of context. In verse 1, Luke tells us that Jesus is surrounded by thousands of people, so many that they are trampling on one another. And in the midst of the crowd, Jesus is speaking to his disciples. We don't know how many disciples he had at that point, certainly not all the crowd. He's talking to them about hypocrisy, about who to fear, about acknowledging and denying him in front of others, and about blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Some pretty meaty

kingdom issues, wouldn't you say? Hopefully they were paying careful attention and taking notes.

And then out of the blue, some guy in the crowd, who apparently was not paying careful attention, asked Jesus for a favor. "Hey, teacher, tell my brother to give me my share of the inheritance." I wonder if his brother was standing there. Awkward!

Now, this sounds like a reasonable request. He's not asking to inherit more than his share; he just wants Jesus to advocate for basic fairness.

Even so, in my imagination Jesus stopped talking, perhaps his mouth hanging open a bit as he was interrupted in mid-sentence. Perhaps he paused for a long moment. Perhaps he leaned over to his disciples and asked, "Do any of you know this guy?" Maybe he rolled his eyes and shook his head. I don't know, I'm just imagining. But we do know he replied with, "Dude," - in the Greek that's the literal word most of your Bibles translate as "Man." He said, "Dude, why are you asking me that? I don't make those decisions. I am not an estate attorney." And now here's the crux of Jesus' response; turning to his disciples he said, "But here's what I will say: Be careful! Don't get greedy. Life does not consist of how much wealth you have."

Makes you wonder if Jesus was in touch with reality, because if you look around (today at least), it sure seems like that's what life is all about. Or maybe that's just my opinion.

Anyway, Luke says that Jesus told them a parable. That's a familiar thing, right? Jesus was always telling parables. He was always making up stories to help people, particularly his disciples, better understand his teaching. Starting in verse 16:

"The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he 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.'"

On the face of it, this sounds ok, I guess. The guy is planning for a rainy day or a possible downturn in the economy. He doesn't want to waste anything. Don't we think he - and we - should be making prudent choices when it comes to managing all that God has given us? Because God has given us a lot.

But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

I'd like to retell this parable in a way that Jesus might have if he were telling it today.

"It was a bull market, Wall Street was hot, and the stock portfolio of a particular young couple was growing by leaps and bounds, moving up and to the right on all the charts. Their shares of Apple did a 2 to 1 split, and Tesla did a 3 to 1. Life was good and getting better, and there was no end in sight. One night at supper, as they discussed their investments, they wondered, "What shall we do with all this money? Let's diversify! Let's sell off a bunch of stock - and buy other stock. Let's buy some bonds. Let's invest in some real estate. Let's buy some gold. The need for computer chips is growing so let's invest in Intel. And how about we invest in this thing called crypto? That looks like a money-maker for sure. And let's sell some shares so we can buy a yacht, with a helicopter pad, and sail the seas. Let's buy a nice cabin up in the mountains so we can have a place to stay when we go skiing in the winter. And let's buy an apartment in NYC so we can spend time closer to the Wall Street. Ain't life grand!" But God said to them, "You fools! You're gonna die on your way home tonight. Who's going to enjoy all that wealth then?"

And then Jesus concludes with another important point: "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." Whoever tries to get rich for themselves instead of being rich toward God - whatever exactly that is - will get the same reward as this guy: nothing.

A couple things to notice, and some questions.

First, notice the guy who got this started. Jesus is in the midst of teaching his disciples about serious kingdom issues, but this guy obviously wasn't paying attention. So, he butts in and wants Jesus to make his brother pay him.

You've never done anything like that, right? You've never paid so much attention to your own personal issues that you totally missed it when Jesus spoke? You've never done that, right? Yah, me either.

Notice how Jesus responds. He warns his disciple about being covetous. Covetousness means to be marked by an inordinate desire for wealth or possessions. Inordinate. Disproportionately large. Too much. There is a normal level of desire and interest, and there is too much.

Why should he guard against having an inordinate desire for stuff? Because, according to this guy named Jesus, life does not consist in having a lot of stuff.

Wait, what? I thought that is the goal of life - getting more, getting ahead, being able to see your portfolio move up and to the right. You would think that's what life is about if you watch the commercials. The meaning of life is to be found in drinking the right beer, driving the right car, wearing the right clothes, visiting the right vacation spots. Not to mention free shipping if you order before midnight. To buy these amazing things and have these amazing experiences, we must have money. More money. Lots of money. But if you don't have the cash, we can lend

it to you at no interest if you pay off the principle within the next 5 years. Jesus' point here goes against conventional wisdom. He says that life does NOT consist in the abundance of our stuff.

And then Jesus told them a parable about a guy who thought the years ahead were going to be filled with eating, drinking, and being merry. But alas, it was not to be.

A parable is a made-up story. It's fiction, so, in this case we don't need to worry about, or feel sorry for, or pray for the rich guy. We can't generalize about what isn't here, but I think we should notice what is. And one thing we notice is that the star of the story is a rich guy who appears to be only concerned with himself.

The term narcissist comes to mind. Uber self-centered. He talks about me, and I, and my, and mine. No one else entered into his thoughts or plans. As far as he was concerned, at least from what we observe in this short story, life was all about him. He was the sunshine of his life.

You've never done anything like that, act self-centered, right? You are a good Christian, right? You attend Sunday worship on a regular basis. You give, you serve, right? You try to do the right thing. So of course, you would never make any decision - financial or otherwise - that was all about you and pretty much left everyone else out. You would never do that, right? Me either.

The number one issue, the target in the crosshairs of his sights, was enjoying all his riches. It consumed him. So, Jesus warned his disciples - and us as well - to be on guard against being covetous. He doesn't say ignore money and things. He doesn't say live in poverty. He says be on your guard. Why? Because an inordinate desire to gain wealth can consume you. It can take your focus off of what is really important. Having an inordinate desire for things doesn't spring on you full blown; it creeps up on you. It's sneaky. It's easy to not see it coming. There is nothing wrong with wanting stuff and being concerned about your 401K - until it replaces our desire for God. That's the real question here, isn't it? Has the rich man's desire for and focus on more things distracted his attention from participating in the kingdom of God?

Jesus called this guy a fool because it had distracted him. Not oh, you poor misguided soul. Not oh, you deserved better. Fool. That's kind of harsh, don't ya think?

Jesus offered up a summarizing statement to the parable: So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. Eugene Peterson, in the Message, paraphrases Jesus this way: That's what happens when you fill your barn with self and not with God.

Which raises a very relevant question we can all ask ourselves: What am I filling MY barn with - self, or God? Please don't make the mistake of applying that question to someone else.

That's easy to do, we all do it but you can't answer that for anyone else, only for yourself. So, this morning ask it of yourself. What am I filling my barn with? And whatever your answer, follow it up with, "Are you sure?" Seriously - ask yourself out loud - what am I filling my barn with?

In the next few verses Jesus sneaks a command in there that we tend to ignore and avoid. He tells us don't be anxious, consider the ravens and the lilies. Don't worry about what you'll eat or drink. Seek the kingdom of God first and all the rest of this stuff will be added to you. Your heart will be where your treasure is, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

We like those verses. They are comforting, reassuring verses. Not much to disturb us. Or maybe we think this passage is not literally about money, it's about my heart - about faith and hope and joy. I've leaned it that way this morning. I don't really have to compromise my contributions to my 401K to follow Jesus.

But then Jesus slips a huge challenge in here that makes us uncomfortable if we notice it. "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy." Seriously? Sell my stuff? That's unreasonable. Surely Jesus doesn't mean that literally! And give to the poor? Woah! I'm not gonna do that. I worked hard for what I have. And you know how needy people are, right? They're needy - lazy. They don't want to work. They want someone to take care of them - a free ride. I know we say God's word is true and authoritative and inerrant and infallible, but I just can't believe that Jesus would really want me to sell my possessions and give the money to the needy.

A quick sidebar. When is the last time you read the story about the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25? It's the final judgment and the Son of Man divides people into two groups - sheep and goats. The sheep are the people who gave food and water to the hungry, and clothing to the naked, and visited the prisoner, and welcomed the stranger. The goats are the people who did not. Jesus says the sheep get welcomed into the kingdom, the goats get sent to eternal punishment, because of what they did, or did not do. It seems our eternal destiny is decided based on whether we took care of the needy or not. Sounds like works righteousness, doesn't it?

Now I get that salvation is a gift of God based on his grace and mercy and love and has nothing to do with our works. Paul tells us that explicitly in Ephesians 2. I do not disagree. AND at the same time, from reading Jesus' words in Matthew 25, it sure looks like the way we treat the needy has a direct bearing on our eternal destiny, doesn't it? So perhaps we should think long and hard before we casually dismiss or argue our way out of helping people whom we deem unworthy.

How are you feeling after being pushed on this idea of selling your stuff and giving to the needy? My guess is that at the very least you didn't really like that idea. I don't. Perhaps your

mind jumped to the ending balance on your most recent bank statement, you feel a bit insecure over that number, and so the idea of giving any away, or giving anything substantial, should be avoided.

A quick side squirrel. I know a guy who is a multi-millionaire - multi - and even with that kind of wealth, he is worried about having enough money.

Which makes me think that the real issue is not our bank balance, or being focused on material things. Even covetously. That certainly enters in, and after all, being the good Jesus followers we are, we know we should not be focused on material things. But perhaps those are just symptoms of a larger issue. Based on Jesus' comment that the guy in the parable is not rich toward God, I wonder if the larger issue for him, and perhaps you and I - at least at times - is that we are filling our barns with the wrong things. Maybe part of the reason so many people get uptight - and even angry - when the pastor talks about money in church, and why so many pastors avoid it, is that we have invested our money and our stuff in the wrong places.

If I asked you to raise your hand if money is your number one priority in life, you wouldn't, would you? If I asked, "where is your heart?" you would not answer the stock market. Neither would I. We would answer "Jesus! Jesus is number one in my life." After all, we are in church, and Jesus is the correct answer to most any question asked at church.

Jesus says if you want to know where your heart is - if you want to know where your interest and your passion and your focus is, where the deep down real you is - notice where your treasure is, because your heart follows your treasure. Typically, our treasure is our time and our money and our stuff - whatever is of value to us. So where do you invest your treasure? Is it in kingdom issues? Or something else? Are we trying to fill our barns with self, or with God?

This parable, and the rest of scripture, does not tell us to ignore our material needs and wants, to ignore money and things. Maybe we get that from misquoting and misapplying that verse that says money is the root of all evil. But that's not what it says. Paul, in 1 Tim 6:10, says it is the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Money can be an amazing and powerful tool to use to build the kingdom, if we focus on the kingdom and not love the money.

I think the guy in the crowd had lost sight of the kingdom, if he ever had it in sight to start with. So perhaps we need to ask ourselves where is my heart? How much time and energy do I spend focusing on my material wealth. Back to the question of what we are filling our barns with.

Statistics tell us that the biggest topic of conflict in a marriage is money. Do you and your spouse get into fights about money? If so, maybe - maybe - you are trying to fill your barn with the wrong things.

How is your generosity? I'm not asking about how much you give to the church; I'm asking about your level of generosity. Do you have a hard time being generous with your money? "Do you give?" I hope you do, because as followers of Jesus we need to give. We were created in the image of a giving god. Giving breaks down covetousness, selfishness and narcissism, and helps us keep our focus on the kingdom.

Maybe your personal application is to go home and reevaluate your generosity.

Do you have a hard time being generous with your time? It is difficult because we are all so busy, right? Ask someone how are you, and the popular, award-winning reply is "Busy, busy, busy." Busy has become a status symbol. But busy with what?

Perhaps another indicator of our focus on the kingdom, which is particularly appropriate right now, is how we deal with those who have differing political opinions than ours.

I know people, and maybe you do too, who believe that Donald Trump is the 4th member of the trinity and if we can just get him and the Republicans back into power everything will be fine. I know people who believe Donald Trump and his Republican cronies sit at the right hand of the devil. If you replace Donald Trump and Republicans with Joe Biden and Democrats, all will be well. Whatever position you take in all this, what I want to know is how you, as a follower of Jesus, think of and treat and talk to the people who are not in the same place as you, who do not hold the same political and social convictions you hold, who think and vote differently and live differently than you?

I am part of a family that has members all across the political spectrum. Thanksgiving is coming, and when we get together in two weeks, we'll talk religion and politics, which we do every time we gather and which has great potential for conflict. But you know what? That potential never gets realized because we all know that despite our different political positions, we all want to follow Jesus. We've talked about that. And so, we try to make that the guide in our conversations, and so far, we have met with success. It's not always easy because we hold some strongly differing opinions on issues and people, and we share those perspectives and opinions. But we make it a point to keep the focus where it needs to be.

So, here's the big question: What am I filling my barn with? Of course, the answer is, or at least should be, Jesus and his kingdom. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, right. But let's ask ourselves one more time - what am I filling my barn with - self or God? Am I sure? Exactly how that works and looks in your life is up to you; I can't spell it out for you. Hopefully the

questions and illustrations I've used this morning will help you figure that out. But it's a question we not only need to ask ourselves - we need to answer it - don't you think?