

THE SLAVERY OF POSSESSIONS

Luke 12:13-21

There is a common creed in America that I've heard everywhere I've lived, among Christians and non-Christians, among wealthy and poor. It is the idea that money equals freedom. It's sometimes expressed, "If I only had enough money, I could get out of this place," or "If I could just pay off my student loans, I'd be free at last!" But does money really equal freedom? Now on the surface, we would have to answer yes. A family at a low-income level may not be free to take any vacation in a given year; another family with more income might be able to take a modest vacation staying at Grandma's house; but a family with a high income level is able to fly to Australia and stay in 5-star hotels. But, on a deeper level, does our freedom depend on our finances?

Interestingly, Jesus has more to say about money than just about any other subject. In verse 15 He makes the following statement, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." He starts this discourse on money with a qualifier: guard against coveting. You see, it's not so much whether we have money or not that is important, it's much more about the state of our hearts. Am I satisfied with what God has given me, the state He has me in, or do I long for what others have, showing discontent for His providence in my life? But, then after that qualifier, Jesus makes a statement that has as much relevance to modern American culture as anything in all of literature- *your life isn't defined by your possessions*

Now, you need to know something about my childhood family: the men in my family are all collectors, we're known for what we pursue. One of us is a music collector who has around 4,000 CD's, one of us is a movie buff that sees everything that comes out, and one of us is a bibliophile (book lover) and collector. My mom doesn't define herself by any of her possessions; she just loves us for who we are, fully aware that we're idiots. How many people define their life by their possessions? Have you ever referred to yourself as a Chevy man or a Toyota family? Don't we often tend to label people as successful purely based on how much money they've made and how big their house is?

In contrast to the idea that money brings freedom, I believe defining life by your possessions makes (at least) 3 things *impossible*: loving the poor, pursuing a spiritual life, and trusting in God.

Let's start with the first point, that defining life by your possessions makes loving the poor impossible. If your reputation or worth is based on what you have achieved, what is your attitude towards the poor? At best it is pity, at worst it is condescension. Some poor people surely don't want to be poor and need help. They have become poor for whatever reasons, whether they are disabled, sickly, or have no education or training. But, some people are perfectly happy being poor- artists who've chosen a lifestyle of day-to-day existence, tribes who share everything and know nothing of stockpiling your own things, even missionaries who've given up everything. Jim Elliot was a missionary to the Auca Indians who made the famous statement, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

But what is this rich man's attitude towards the poor? TOTAL NEGLIGENCE. Look at verse 17. His land has produced an abundant crop and now he's faced with what to do with all of it. Now, something I didn't think about until I studied this passage in

depth, is the fact that this man was likely not living in isolation, but rather would have been living in some type of village or community where each member depended on each other for things. If this man had an abundance of crops, at the very least he should have put it into the village commerce system. And at best he should have given the excess to the poor, as indicated by Old Testament law. But, this man saw life as all about his own comfort and apparently believed the old saying that whoever has the most toys when he dies wins. His heart made it impossible for him to love the poor. This same heart attitude also makes loving the weak impossible, so that children and retarded people have little identity in a society based on material success.

Our second point, that defining life by possessions makes pursuing a spiritual life impossible. Spiritual life is first and foremost about people. My dad had a saying when I was growing up, “Love money and use people or love people and use money.” Which are you committed to? Spiritual life is about caring about the Gospel message, not comfort! Our call is not primarily to “eat, drink, and be merry.” Now, that doesn’t mean that we can’t enjoy what God has given us, but it does mean that our primary commitment should not be to our own comfort, but rather to the call and demands of the Gospel. Many of you who have been to my house know that I have a beautiful house in a great neighborhood. I never imagined that I would live in such a nice house, and I love my neighbors. But I would be willing to sell my house at a moment’s notice if God wanted me to move and pursue another calling (the choice of our current house is tied to our calling to church planting among the new and unchurched in Stillwater.)

The third point is closely linked to the second point, the idea that defining life by our possessions makes trusting in God impossible. Jesus has some very difficult words for the wealthy saying, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Now, I’ve known many generous wealthy people who are following the Lord and serving Him with their lives and their finances. But the thing about money is that it can often become your identity and trust. Just as we might be tempted to think that money equals freedom, we also often think that money brings security. Wrong. The only real security and power is found in God, who has power to destroy or preserve regardless of any other foe or power, as Jesus makes clear in verse 20-21, “But God said to him, ‘Fool, this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, who will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

Now, many of you who are students and have part-time jobs may be thinking, “I don’t make much money right now. I can’t really give right now. After I graduate, when I’m making real money, then I’ll be able to give to God.” The truth is, if you’re not giving of what little you have right now, you’ll likely never give. Because giving has to do much more with heart change than socio-economic change. Interestingly, the statistics bear this out. Did you know that if you make less than \$25,000 a year you’ll take second place in ranking of the biggest givers to charities, churches, and the poor? If you make between \$25-50,000 you’ll be in first place as the biggest givers. Now, if at some point in your life you start to make between \$50-100,000, the statistics say that your giving will go down to 3-4% of your income. And if your income should ever exceed \$100,000, your giving will be less than .5%-one half of one percent. In effect, you essentially won’t be giving anything away. Why? Because you’ll find more and more things to spend your money on, and new ways to try to keep up with the wealth of your neighbors.

Now, it's worthwhile to ask the question, Why be generous to God? The best answer is because He's been generous to you. We could spend all day listing out the many ways that God has given you great gifts. There is a principle in the area of tithing and it has to do with giving the first-fruits of our labors. For the man in our parable, that would mean that the first part of his harvest would go to the temple. For us, it means giving our tithes and offerings as a first offering. My own family practice is to give immediately after we've written in our paycheck amount into our checkbook- the next check we write is the tithe checks, before the mortgage or utility or credit card bills. This may be symbolic, but it is part of our act of worship. God asks for our first-fruits *because He gave us His firstborn*. In sending Christ to die for us, God showed an ultimate generosity that will never be matched or exceeded by anything we could give in return.

Does God need our money? We have to answer, NO. He's perfect in who He is. His glory is complete. He has no lack or need that we could fill. So, why does He ask us to be rich towards Him? Because it's part of our becoming satisfied in Him only. John Piper sums it up well when he says, "The sun of God's glory was made to shine at the center of the solar system of our souls." In other words, life is best, we're most joyful, when God's glory is penetrating our lives and moving us to action. You're least joyful when you're focused on yourself. When we start addressing ourselves in the third person, like the rich man here (and like many modern-day athletes), we start focusing more on what we want rather than what God has for us.

Does money equal freedom? NO. Trusting God with your life equals true freedom.