

I can't tell you how often I read a passage like this one from scripture and say, "Wait a minute!" This is one of those stories. God calls a rich man a fool. But I'm thinking, he seems pretty smart to me.

A rich man has an abundant harvest. The man apparently comes by his wealth honestly; this isn't the parable of the dishonest manager. There is nothing here of theft; there is no mistreatment of workers or any criminal act. Sun, soil, and rain join to make him wealth. He is careful and conservative. He just needs to figure out what to do with all his crops, and what he decides to do is create a way to store it. That seems prudent; it seems wise, not foolish.

After he saves up everything he needs, he plans to enjoy life. And what's wrong with that? He's echoing scripture itself; Ecclesiastes 3:13 it says, "This is the gift from God; that all people should eat, drink, and enjoy the results of their hard work." If it's a gift from God, what's the problem?

And isn't he doing what most of us try to do, with our retirement plans and 401ks? Don't most of us hope to enjoy our retirement years? How is the man supposed to know when he's going to die? How do any of us know? Shouldn't we plan for the future as if we're going to live a good long while?

How exactly is he being a fool? What is he doing that's so foolish in God's eyes?

Let's look more closely at the text...

First, notice the pronouns in the parable. "My barns, my grain, my goods, my soul." I, me, my, mine. Do you see what's wrong with this picture? Nothing belongs to us. Nothing. It's all from God it all belongs to God. All of it. Even our lives. We're not the owners, we're trustees.

The first problem this man has is that he thinks it's all his. "Fool," says God. "Tonight your life will be demanded of you." Our lives – our stuff – aren't ours to begin with.

That's problem number one: *it's not his stuff to hoard.*

The second, related problem has to do with the size of his world. Did you hear the conversation the man in the parable is having? Who is the man talking to?

He's talking to himself! "I'll say to myself, 'Soul....'" He thinks alone, he acts alone, and he thinks only of his own life and future. There are no relationships in the story. Not one.

That's problem number two: *he thinks the world revolves around him.*

The third problem has to do with how he understands security. As Bible scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes, "The man in the story is not a fool because he is rich. He is a fool because he identifies his very existence with the security he thinks comes from having grain stored in barns." (Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing*

*Possessions: What Faith Demands*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 56.)

Our security doesn't come from having more stuff. Not in the grand scheme of things.

As Johnson observes, "*It is out of deep fear that the acquisitive instinct grows monstrous. Life seems so frail and contingent that many possessions are required to secure it, even though the possessions are frailer still than the life.*" — Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina series*, Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., Ed, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 201.

Fear drives us from acquiring to hoarding. We think somehow that having more stuff is going to protect us more, make us safe.

But as Johnson argues, we can only be spiritually free if we're convinced that life is a gift from God – the source of everything. And we can tell when we're spiritually free when we start giving our stuff away instead of getting and keeping more and more.

Problem number three is thinking *security lies in stuff*. Our deepest, most spiritual selves know better.

Which leads us to a related problem, problem four: the man's hoarding.

Another writer, Mark Allan Powell, makes the observation that while "the world of the Bible knew nothing of stock markets, tax brackets, or pension plans... as a general principle... money is to be *used*, not hoarded." (Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 93)

It's not just that hoarding is bad for us spiritually, it's that it isn't God's intention for creation. We're trustees of our possessions because God wants us to use them for the good of the world, not so we can get and keep more and more of it.

As Powell observes: "Note [the rich man's] reasoning: "I need bigger barns," not "I need less stuff." Which would have been easier? To build more barns or to give food away? It's like his possessions have come to possess him.

Problem four is *hoarding, not helping*.

Then there's problem number five. We can't take it with us. There's a reason you never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul!

You know that quote in Ecclesiastes I talked about before, "people should eat, drink, and enjoy the results of their hard work"? The prophet Isaiah puts it a little differently: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." (Is. 22:13)

Does anybody remember the singer-songwriter Harry Chapin? His most well-known song was "Cat's in the Cradle":

First verse:

My child arrived just the other day  
He came to the world in the usual way  
But there were planes to catch, and bills to pay  
He learned to walk while I was away  
And he was talking 'fore I knew it, and as he grew  
He's say, "I'm gonna be like you, dad  
You know I'm gonna be like you."

In the last verse the man looks back at his life:

I've long since retired, my son's moved away.

I called him up just the other day.

I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind."

He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I can find the time.

You see my new job's a hassle and the kids have the flu

But it's been sure nice talking to you.

And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me,

He'd grown up just like me.

My boy was just like me.

Time does not wait for us to get enough stuff and then get to the life we want to live. Problem five is thinking we have all the time in the world. We don't.

As I was working through this passage I found myself thinking over and over again about Charles Dicken's story, *A Christmas Carol*. I thought, that story could be a commentary on this parable. Ebenezer Scrooge is the embodiment of all the problems of the man in the parable. Isolated, self-centered, oblivious to the needs of others, thinking that the money he has will make him safe...

Ebenezer Scrooge is a tight-fisted miser, and everything that mattered was wrapped around getting money, counting money, holding on to money – at the expense of every relationship or pleasure in the world. His life is wrapped around money and nothing – nothing else – could get in.

First comes the ghost of Christmas past, reminding him how happy his life used to be, the love he once felt, the joy he once knew, the one he squandered...

Second, the ghost of Christmas present, showing him how alone he really is, the life he is missing, and how little he even knows about the people around him and the burdens of others...

And then the ghost of Christmas future.... Do you remember what that ghost shows to Ebenezer Scrooge?

It's his grave. It is his grave...

One day our lives will be required of us, and in the meantime, what kind of life are we living? If all we have in life is "I, me, my and mine," how sad is that?

Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly." And that abundance has nothing to do with bigger barns. Nothing.

Let's go back to the beginning of the passage for a moment. Do you remember how it starts, what prompts Jesus' parable in the first place?

A man asks Jesus to solve a problem for him...

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." It must have been an ugly dispute for him to try to drag Jesus into the middle.

But the problem wasn't dividing the family inheritance. The real problem was that the inheritance was dividing the family.

Be careful, Jesus tells him. Just be careful.

"Protect yourself from every form of greed," he tells the man.

"Building a personal treasure isn't worth it.

"Life doesn't consist of an abundance of possessions."

What does abundant life look like for you?

When we're tempted to build our own security, maybe it's letting go of fear a little - being spiritually free and confident of living in God's grace...

When we get wrapped up in ourselves, it may be remembering that we live in community, and nurturing deep and satisfying relationships...

Instead of acquiring and hoarding more, it may be sharing what we have with people who need it...

Instead of being so focused on securing a storehouse for the future, it may simply be paying attention to our lives here and now...

Jesus isn't telling people to be reckless. He is telling us to be careful. Life doesn't consist of an abundance of possessions.

Because God's abundance is so much more.

