

TO BE RICH TOWARDS GOD

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARANNA, FLORIDA
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LUKE 12:13-21

An old proverb tells us that money can't buy happiness. Another tells us that we can't take it with us. Some wit once said that he'd never seen an armored car in a funeral procession. And, of course, the late George Burns once said, "I've been rich and I've been poor, and take it from me, rich is better!"

Jesus spent a remarkable amount of time talking about money, about riches. The parable here, of a rich man who is laying up treasure for the future when he has no future, makes clear again that we can't take our riches with us into the life beyond this one.

There are times when I feel a great deal like the rich man in the parable. We have accumulated so much stuff. Books, furniture, pictures, things that people have given us, things we've inherited, family heirlooms

It has been a year and a half since I retired, and we've got a garage and a spare room full of boxes down in Arcadia that we still haven't unpacked. We brought dishes, linens, a few pieces of furniture up here when I accepted the call to be your interim pastor, and I don't know where we'll put it when my time here with you is over.

I think I've figured it out. Arcadia has a lot of antique shops, and stores that sell collectibles. I'm going to rent a store downtown, and put all our stuff on display for sale. What I want to keep, I'll price so high no one would buy it. The rest, I'll just price fairly. And if I don't make enough to pay the rent on the store, I'll deduct it as a loss on my tax return!

Seriously, most of us have way too much stuff. We are burdened down with material possessions that we don't know what to do with. We've got clothes that we'll never wear again, but they are too good to throw away, and we might someday lose enough weight to get back into them. And they might someday come back in style!

There is a scene in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby* that I don't think has made it to the screen in either of the movie renditions I've seen.

Gatsby is standing on the deck of a ship getting ready to sail. He is waving to the crowd gathered on the dock to send him off. As he waves, he drops one of his expensive kid gloves into the water. Immediately, he strips the other glove off his hand, and tosses it after its mate.

How many of us have a drawer full of socks without mates? How many of us are saving stuff that we'll never need, or never use?

When we had rummage sales at the church in Arcadia, we would get a lot of nice things donated. But we would also get a lot of junk. I was involved with the Salvation Army Thrift Store for several years, and it was the same way there. A lot of the stuff that is donated could not be used. At both the church and the Salvation Army, we never had enough space to store all the stuff that comes in! We were like the man in the parable. We need to tear down what we had and build a bigger barn.

But that isn't riches, it isn't wealth, it isn't treasure. It is just stuff.

And so is most of the stuff we accumulate. Its worth, its value, is not significant. It has a sentimental value, perhaps. But it is still stuff that we could get along without. It is still just stuff.

In the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew's gospel, Jesus put it in true perspective. He said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)

Where is our treasure? Where are true riches to be found?

A game that I've played at church camps and conferences asks the question, if your house was on fire, and you could take only one thing out of the house with you, what would it be?

Would it be your photo album, maybe your wedding pictures? Would it be your family Bible, with the record of all of the marriages, births, deaths, baptisms, for generations? Would it be a family heirloom, an antique, maybe a pet? Whatever it is, that says a lot about what you value, about what is important, about what you treasure.

If you could take something with you to the grave, what would it be? What would you want to be buried with you? The Vikings of old loaded the bodies of the dead into a boat, filled the boat with the possessions of the deceased into the boat, and shoved it out to sea, setting fire to it as they did.

Some of the Plains Indian tribes buried their chief with his weapons, and killed his favorite war pony and laid it to rest with him.

We know about the tombs of Egypt, and of ancient China, where great riches accompanied the Pharaohs and the Emperors into the next life.

Except that it didn't. The Pharaoh is dead, the Emperor is turned to dust, and museums now hold the plunder left behind.

What then, are the true riches, those which can be stored up, treasured in heaven?

Well, the Apostle Paul taught is that love never ends. So the love we know, the love of God, the love of our family and friends, the love we share, that is a treasure that will last forever, that not even death can take away.

The acts of kindness, the acts of charity, the acts of faithfulness, the good deeds we do, don't last forever, and often go unnoticed and unreported in this life, but they shall surely be recognized in the life to come.

The things we do for Jesus, the things we do for the love of God, the times we've shown God's love to another living being, those are treasures that can't be stolen, that moth and rust can't destroy.

The memories of the life we have lived are our treasures. The things that people think about us after we're gone may be our only legacy.

True riches are found in the things that last eternally, and only what we do for God can stand that test of time. Jesus contrasts the rich fool with one who is rich toward God. How can one be rich towards God? By giving to others, as God has given to you. By supporting God's work in the world. By doing God's work in the world. By loving others as God loves us in Jesus Christ. Those are the true riches, and nothing can ever take them away.

Let us pray.

O Lord, you have given us so much. Help us to be grateful. Help us to use the abundance that we have to help others and to trust in you and not in things. Free us from our love of the material, and help us to love as you love us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.