

Luke 12:13-21 Abundant Life

The Word of the Lord from Luke 12: “Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions. That’s worth some serious thought. To illustrate this truth, this warning, Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool. The rich man’s land produces plentifully, so much so that he doesn’t have enough room to store all of his crops. So he decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones so that he can store more grain or goods. Then he gives one of the silliest speeches recorded in Scripture: he says to his soul, “Soul, you have ample good laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” After all, isn’t that what the soul is all about?

Hardly. God has the final word in the parable, saying to the rich man, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” See, there’s nothing wrong with relaxing, eating, drinking and merriment in themselves: but these are helpful treatments for the body and mind, not the soul. The rich man expects his riches to take care of his soul, at least for many years to come. But saving souls is the work of God, and there’s the rich man’s problem—as soon as he’s declared that his goods will take care of his soul, he’s made them into a false god. When God requires his soul that night in the parable, the relaxing and eating and drinking and merriment do nothing for him in the Judgment.

So the rich man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. They cannot prevent his death; and when he dies, he can’t take them with him. They just go on to somebody else, if moth and rust do not corrupt them first.

The parable is a clear warning: beware the sin of greed. Obsession with possessions is a terrible temptation. It leads you to value things over people. It leads you to put your trust in things that fall apart and pass away. It tempts you to resent God if you don’t have all you want. It seduces you to believe that your soul is good in God’s eyes because you have enough things. Greed is a dangerous idol, and like lust it’s never satisfied: the more you have, the more you want. It always requires that you make more sacrifices to it in order to pursue more gain.

You don’t even have to have the things to be guilty of the sin. While the rich man in the parable already has all sorts of wealth, Jesus tells the parable because of a man who isn’t wealthy yet. This whole lesson begins with someone in the crowd saying to Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” It’s a family squabble, with an inheritance to be shared. People bring such requests to rabbis all the time, but this Teacher declines the request. Though as God He provides all things, Jesus isn’t there to divide out the family farm: He hasn’t come for such temporal things. Why has He come? To do what goods and grain, what relaxing and eating and drinking and merriment can’t do: He’s come to save their souls for eternity—and if their souls, then also their bodies. So He warns the crowd against covetousness, against desiring things that they don’t have. It’s a close cousin to greed, and with coveting comes a host of sins. Like greed, among these sins is the willingness to pursue things at the expense of others—two of the Ten Commandments warn that coveting is the opposite of love, wishing harm upon your neighbor. Worse though, is discontent: covetousness says, “What I have isn’t enough. I should have more. I want more.

God has messed up in only giving me what I have.” The one who sins by coveting seems even sillier than the rich fool in the parable. At least the rich man said, “I trust in what I have to take care of my soul.” The one who covets says, “I trust in what I don’t have to take care of my soul.”

So Jesus warns, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness;” and He adds, “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

Your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions. Beware, because greed and covetousness will tempt you daily. You’ll always be tempted to want more, to worry about what you don’t have, to resent those who have more than you do. It doesn’t matter how much you have or don’t have— it’s all quite relative. A relatively-recent study concluded that if you have assets worth \$2200 per adult in your household, you’re in the top half of the wealthy in the world. If your assets (not just cash in the bank, but total assets) are worth \$61,000, you’re in the top 10% of the world’s wealthy. Since such surveys are often political footballs, I don’t know that I trust those numbers completely, but this is true: you may not be extravagantly wealthy, but you’re far from the Kibera slum in Nairobi, or ordinary life in Haiti: the Lord has blessed us with immense prosperity here. But no matter how much wealth you have, or don’t have, you’ll be tempted to greed and to covetousness. You’ll be tempted to believe that, as long as you have enough of what you want, then life is good and your soul is taken care of.

But your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions.

We should expand that, too, because you’ll covet and be greedy for more than grain and goods.

Your life does not consist in the abundance of your popularity. This is one of the devil’s great attacks on youth, I think: the in-crowd sets the standard, and if you conform you’re in. Or at least you’re trying. If you covet the approval of the popular crowd, you’ll be tempted to at least give your approval to disobedience and immorality. You’ll put your faith on the back burner, because the Gospel isn’t “in.” But popularity can’t do anything for your soul. On the Last Day, what is “in” now will be definitely “out.” Way out. Outer-darkness out.

Your life does not consist in the abundance of your looks or fashion sense. There’s nothing wrong with looking good, but our society wants you to find your worth in how you look. It’s a losing game: age comes upon us all, and clothing goes out of style even faster. But that’s not your life, either.

Your life does not consist in the abundance of your health. Our culture is quick to make gods out of athletics, health and nutrition. Again, there’s nothing wrong with any of those, but you’ll be tempted to believe that you are only truly alive when you’re disease-free, injury-free, cellulose-free, whatever. This also is a losing proposition, because time and chance happen to all. If health becomes a god, you lose all, because your life does not consist in the abundance of your health.

Your life does not consist in the abundance of the knowledge you’ve accrued, or the peace within your family, or the goals that you’ve attained, or the diplomas you’ve earned, or the promotions you’ve received, or the items you’ve crossed off your bucket list. But you’re tempted to covet all of these things, to believe that they are what give you life, and to believe they are good for your soul. But none of these things give life to your soul.

Flee these temptations, and repent when you give into them. All of these things are false gods when you put your trust in them, and putting your trust in them reveals even more about you than greed or covetousness. It reveals that you don't really understand life or soul. It reveals that you do not love and trust in God above all things as you should. While all of the things we've mentioned are blessings that can make your life happier, none of these things can give you life. All of these things are meaningless vanity and passing away. More importantly, none of these things can give life to your soul. That is why Jesus warns, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Now all of this is true, but please note: we've answered this all according to the Law. The Law says to guard against all covetousness because it's a sin, because it's a sin to believe that your life does consist in the abundance of your possessions. However, there's some very good news to be found here. If your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions, then of what does your life consist?

See, there's another very good reason to repent of making your life about the abundance of possessions or other things that will pass away: the Lord gives you so much more than that. He gives you gifts that do not pass away. He gives you life that does not pass away.

This is what the cross is about. Jesus became flesh and went to the cross for you. He died for your sin, including greed and covetousness and every evil desire. He died your death for you, so that you might not go the way of all things in this world which pass away. He rose again to give you life—eternal life in heaven. He has made you a child of God in Holy Baptism, so that now you're an heir of the kingdom of heaven.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away," said Jesus (Luke 21:33). All things in this world will crumble to dust, but not His holy Word. Jesus' words include, "I forgive you for all of your sins." They include, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). They include, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). These words will never pass away, and He speaks them to you. Therefore, you will never pass away. The kingdom of heaven is yours. In other words, He gives you hope. With forgiveness, He gives you hope.

Greed and covetousness are sins of the hopeless: if you have no faith in God who will raise you from the dead, then this life is all that there is. If this life is all that there is, then the best you can do in this life is grab as much as you can and hold onto it as long as you can. That's a life of quiet desperation, maybe not-so-quiet. The things of this world are easy to lose, hard to regain; and eventually, all things pass away.

Now, you still have the specter of death hanging around, but you also have hope in Christ. Where you worry about what you do not have, you consider the lilies of the field and the sparrows of the air, knowing how much the Lord cares for them: because you know that Jesus didn't become a lily to redeem lilies or a sparrow to redeem sparrows. He became man to redeem you: and if He redeemed you at the cost of His own blood, He will not fail to give you forgiveness and life.

Because things are so easy to lose and hard to regain, you're tempted to love things too much— to hoard things out of greed rather than use them in service to others. But that's the life of those with no hope, and that is not for you. The Lord sets you free from such greed, gives you a kingdom that will not pass away. Where things of this world you treasure

are damaged or lost, you know that they were gifts of God for a while anyway: they are not your life. Where you have opportunity to help your neighbor, care for those in need and support the proclamation of the Gospel, you don't clutch to keep all you have for yourself, because you know that the things that you have are gifts of God to be used in service to others. You can't take it with you, anyway.

You have hope, and you have hope because your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions. You have a much greater abundance than that: your life consists of Christ in you, the hope of glory. Your life consists of His life, because He's joined you to His death and resurrection so that you might live forever. Your life does not consist of things that pass away, but of Christ who keeps you for eternity. Of the rich man in the parable, Jesus says, "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God:" his soul is not fed by grains and good, and so he is poor and dead before the Lord. To lay up treasure for yourself is hopeless, but you are rich toward God. You're rich toward God because He pours out His riches upon you—grace and life and every blessing in Christ. He is the Shepherd of your soul, and so you will dwell in His house forever.

So Jesus says, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." You'll always be tempted to hear Him as a killjoy as He warns you against love for the things of this world. But ultimately, His message is this: He has better things to give—eternal things. Your life isn't the sum total of your possessions. The Lord is your life and your salvation. Hopelessness is not for you, but eternal life: because Jesus pours out abundantly the riches of His grace, so that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen