

Invest In Others

Luke 12:13-21

9th Sunday after Pentecost

7th August 2011

A 6th grade teacher posed the following problem to her math class: “A wealthy man dies and leaves ten million dollars. One-third is to go to his wife, one-fifth to his son, one-sixth to his butler, and the rest to charity. Now, how much does each get?” After a very long silence, little Joey raised his hand. “Please miss, each should get a lawyer!” Ah, yes, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! Where there is a will, there is usually a lawyer.¹

When a businessman died in Tennessee, his estranged wife decided ahead of time not to contest the will. But, when the will was read, it appeared the businessman had taken out \$1 million life insurance policy and named his mistress as the beneficiary. That wasn't all. The way the will was written, not only did the mistress collect the \$1 million but the businessman's widow had to pay the taxes on it. When the woman learned that, she could not launch legal action quickly enough. Where there's a will, there is usually a lawyer.²

Usually, when any of us get into legal trouble of whatever kind, we are quick to retain the services of a lawyer. But it seems from a report out this past week that there are times when it is more to a person's advantage not to get a lawyer. According to Nicholas Bala of Queen's University and Rachel Birnbaum of The University of Western Ontario, “Ontarians fighting divorce and custody battles face higher legal expenses if their spouse goes without a lawyer. Hundreds of family law lawyers surveyed in late June said they have to spend more time documenting discussions with an unrepresented opponent than they would if they were dealing with another lawyer because there is greater potential for misunderstanding. That extra time drives up costs for their clients.”³

Now, I am not sure if this is good information to release to the general public because it would mean that if a person is involved in divorce proceedings – especially if these proceedings are acrimonious – it would be to their perverse advantage not to hire a lawyer because it would then cause the other party maximum financial pain and discomfort. Not, of course, that any of us would be contemplating a divorce. And, if we were, we would not do such a mean and despicable thing, would we?

Talking about not wanting to hire a lawyer, the man in today's story from Luke's Gospel did not want to do that but for a different reason. He was too cheap. He was upset that his brother would not divide their deceased father's property equally with him but he begrudged the cost of taking proper action to resolve the action. So he turned to Jesus and asked him to adjudicate on the issue because there was a long-standing tradition in Jewish communities that a rabbi could also settle matters of legal dispute.⁴

However, Jesus, wise man that he was, refused to get involved in that domestic squabble. On the other hand, he

didn't exactly walk away. Rather, he took the opportunity, as he so often did, to examine the deeper issues involved in the situation. The real problem here, he said, is not the division of an estate but the problem of acquisitiveness. You people place too much stock in amassing material things. And, worse, you think these things constitute the aim and purpose of life. On the contrary, he says. “Watch out and guard yourselves from every kind of greed; because your true life is not made up of the things you own, no matter how rich you may be.”⁵

Now, you would think that today in the enlightened 21st century we would be more aware of the pitfalls of materialism. Goodness knows how often we have heard this theme expounded by psychologists, novelists, agony column writers, not to speak of ministers. But the more things change, the more they remain the same. We still believe that success and well-being in life are tied up with the acquiring of possessions. We still believe naively, that those who have the most money or the most toys at the end of life win the game. We still are as acquisitive as ever without any concerns for the pitfalls or for the effect it has on other people or on our society.

Writing about the recent debt crisis in the U.S., Joseph Natoli on the politicalaffairs.net website drew attention to the fact that, while most wanted to see a deal agreed, there were those who, driven by their own selfish agendas, were hoping for the very reverse.

“Who stands to gain if the U.S. defaults on its debt obligations?” asks Natoli, “We hear many questions, such as what effect would a default have on Wall Street, Main Street and the Washington Beltway, but this question is seldom if ever posed. Perhaps this is so because it emerges from a deep, dark cynicism, or, perhaps because it emerges from recent history.

“Jesse Eisenger and Jake Bernstein, writing in ProPublica, reported how [during the recent recession] a Chicago hedge fund named Magnetar made a vast fortune by betting against the market. It repackaged risky financial securities – collateralized debt obligations – packed them full of even more risky stuff and then bet against these paying off by picking up insurance – credit default swaps – that would pay off upon failure. Note that failure was what they wanted; there was more money to be made if the securities failed than if they were paid off. Everyone involved in this game, namely [investment] bankers, made huge bonuses on this “planned failure” enterprise.”⁶

Isn't it amazing to think that there were those whose greed self-centred greed would drive them to such depths of acquisitiveness? That they would even think of making such huge profits at the expense of others during the recent recession and also the more recent debt crisis? Hard to believe!

But does our contemporary acquisitiveness make us any happier? In his book, *The Progress Paradox*, Gregg Easterbrook argues that the more prosperous people become, the more likely they are to be discontented. One of the reasons he cites is that people are so obsessed with their future prosperity. They get their sense of well-being, not from the prosperity they have at the present, but from their perceived improvement in prosperity in years to come. When that improvement comes, though, they are still not satisfied. They are still looking forward to even better times.

Also he cites “abundance denial” as another source of unhappiness. We are blind to our own prosperity. Others, we believe, always have more than we have. So enough is never enough.⁷

We all probably know people with this kind of poverty mindset. No matter how much they have in terms of material possessions or funds in the bank, they always consider themselves to be poor. “It’s all very well for these people having that beautiful house,” they complain, “How I wish I could afford something like that!” Or, “Isn’t it great for her going off with her friend on that cruise. How I wish I could afford these kinds of luxuries.” And, all the time, the people who make such complaints could buy-and-sell the people they envy. The problem is not lack of funds. The problem is a poverty mindset or an attitude of abundance denial that makes such people so unhappy.

If we are going to find real satisfaction and fulfilment in life, therefore, we have to learn over again the great truth Jesus sought to teach that life is not made up of the things one owns, no matter how rich a person may be.⁸ On the contrary, the more we have, the more likely we are to be unhappy.

Of course, it’s not wrong to acquire material possessions. Rather, the problem arises when our physical assets become the total focus of our lives.

The rich farmer, Jesus spoke about in today’s lesson, was a case in point. The problem lay not in his owning barns but in his building bigger and better barns so he could store up more than he needed for the coming years. Gaining the means to eat, drink and be merry became the sole focus of his life. But then he died prematurely and couldn’t take his wealth with him. He had wasted his life on all the wrong things.⁹

Isn’t it the danger for all of us? The stuff we own, though good in itself, takes centre stage in our lives and crowds out everything else? To the point where it becomes the be-all-and-end-all? Gradually and insidiously, our possessions become more important than anything else. So we become like that Jack Benny character in the skit where he’s approached by a robber demanding, “Your money or your life.” After a long pause, the robber finally asks impatiently, “Well?” Benny replies, “Don’t rush me. I’m thinking about it!”¹⁰

There are ways, of course, we can ensure that we use the material gifts we own rightly and properly – ways that will find favour with God. Use them, first, for the good of others. To alleviate someone else’s load. To feed a hungry person. Be like the woman St. Jerome in the 4th century

talked about, the woman who “preferred to store her money in the stomachs of the needy than in her purse.”¹¹ And, of course, it is not difficult for us, nor are there any lack of opportunities to do this. We just need to think of what is going on East Africa at the moment and how we can invest in their need through Presbyterian World Service and Development.

So invest in other people’s need. But invest, also, in the things of the spirit. Invest in the Kingdom of God.

When a wealthy man died and went to heaven, an angel took him on a guided tour of the celestial city, telling him how the houses there were built from the spiritual capital invested by future inhabitants. He came to a magnificent home. “Who lives there?” asked the wealthy man. “Oh,” the angel answered, “on earth he was a volunteer at the local homeless shelter.” The rich man got excited. If this was the way mere volunteers live, just think of the kind of mansion in which he would spend eternity. They came to an even more magnificent abode. “Who’s is this?” asked the rich man, almost overwhelmed. The angel answered, “She spent her life as a missionary helping the poor in India.” The rich man was really getting excited now. Finally, they came to a tiny eighty-by-eight shack with no window and only a piece of cloth for a door. It was the most run-down home the rich man had ever seen. “This is your home,” said the angel. The wealthy man was flabbergasted. “I don’t understand. The other homes were so beautiful. Why is my home so dilapidated?” The angel smiled sadly, “I’m sorry. We did all we could with what you sent us to work with.”¹²

Dealing with our worldly goods and possessions can be one of our greatest challenges as Christians. But we can use them wisely and well when we invest in other people’s need. When we invest in the things of the spirit. And when we invest in the Kingdom of God.

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St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church

Peterborough, Ontario

¹ King Duncan, “Drowning In A Sea Of Stuff”, *Dynamic Preaching*, 2005 www.eSermons.com

² King Duncan, “Fighting Over Daddy’s Will”, *Ibid.*

³ Tracey Tyler, “How to reduce the high cost of divorce”, *The Toronto Star*, August 1, 2011

⁴ Luke 12:13-15

⁵ Luke 12:15

⁶ Joseph Natoli, “The Most Dangerous Game” August 2, 2011, www.politicalaffairs.net

⁷ Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, Random House, 2003

⁸ Luke 12:15

⁹ Luke 12: 16-21

¹⁰ Brett Blair, “Building Barns, Postponing Life”, Christian Globe Network, 2004

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² King Duncan, *Financial Foolishness*, *Ibid.*