

Luke 12:13–21 (NLT)

Then someone called from the crowd, “Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father’s estate with me.”

Jesus replied, “Friend, who made me a judge over you to decide such things as that?” Then he said, “Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.”

Then he told them a story: “A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, ‘What should I do? I don’t have room for all my crops.’ Then he said, ‘I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. And I’ll sit back and say to myself, “My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!”’

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?’

“Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.”

## Storing Up Treasures

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Luke 12:13-21

One of the great human misconceptions is that our best values will never lead us astray. I take this as pretty bad news. Most of us believe, I think, that justice, fairness and responsibility, for example, are some of the most important things in life. Our churches and denominations hold them in high regard. We fight and advocate for them. Religious teaching would suggest that justice, fairness and responsibility are ingredients in any recipe for thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Is that really a mistake?

Maybe. Maybe not. It's more complicated than we may think.

"Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father's estate with me." Fair enough. The man comes and asks Jesus to settle a family dispute, and the only thing the man asks for is fairness, justice. It's the kind of thing that would have been brought regularly to Rabbis or teachers all the time. In every synagogue was a Seat of Moses, or a judgment seat [slide 1]. The teacher would sit on the seat and teach or render judgments. This one is found in the ancient Synagogue in Chorazin, a few miles from the Sea of Galilee.

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Pretty reasonable request. And yet Jesus answers in a way we are unprepared for. "Friend, who made me a judge over you to decide such things as that?"

Is Jesus shirking his duty? Is he having a bad day? Why would Jesus respond this way to a man who is simply asking him to hand out justice, to be a judge, to do his job sitting there on the Seat of Moses? Or is Jesus really telling the man that fairness and justice don't matter?

We've seen this side of Jesus before. The Prodigal Son. The older son just wants fairness, and the parable makes him out to be the bad guy, while his delinquent brother gets the fatted calf. Mary and Martha. Martha just wants some help around the house, Mary sits at Jesus' feet not helping, and Jesus says that the diligent Martha is the one who's got it all wrong. Martha! Really?

We really have but two choices here. We can dismiss these stories. We can say they are wrong, that Jesus didn't really mean what he says, or that we can just ignore these stories that so obviously offend our sensibilities. Or, or, we can wonder if Jesus has something important to teach us and grapple with these stories that seem so counterintuitive. I fall into the latter camp. I think Jesus is a pretty smart guy. And I think that when he tells a story that pushes against the things we hold most dear, it should call us to pay special attention, not ignore it. We like to believe that God agrees with us about the things we hold most dear. But it just may be that from time to time Jesus wants to teach us about some important flaws in our most sacred cows.

"Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father's estate with me." Jesus doesn't like the request. He as much as berates the man. And then, instead of talking about fairness, he addresses the issue of possessions. "Life is not measured by how much you own," he says.

Then he tells a story sometimes called the rich fool. [slide 2] It's a pretty straightforward story. A man becomes a successful farmer. He tears down smaller barns and builds ever bigger

ones. He stores and expands his wealth. His goal is to have it made in the shade. “Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!” he says.

But, lo, he finds out he’s going to die tonight, and that he can’t take it with him. That’s an important reminder. We can’t take it with us. One man decided to try. He gave instructions that all his cash should be stuffed in his coffin with him. Just before they closed the casket, his lawyer stepped forward, slipped a piece of paper in the dead man’s vest pocket and stuffed all the cash in a briefcase. They asked the lawyer what in the heck he thought he was doing. He said, “I just wrote him a check so he won’t have to carry all that cash around.” Well, I think we can be confident that cash, checks or credit cards won’t be of much help after we die. You can’t take it with you. But that’s hardly Jesus’ most important point.

Jesus was concerned about what the rich fool thought all his possessions would buy him in this life, too. Would he, in fact, eat, drink and be merry? Andrew Carnegie, who knew a thing or two about wealth and possessions once said, “Millionaires rarely smile.” Wealth, and lot of other things too—fame, good looks and status, to name a few—come up empty on delivering fulfillment in life. So, it’s not just that you can’t take it with you. Barns full of money won’t buy you what you think they will even here. The reasons are manifold. Some people are so busy accumulating things that they don’t even bother to try to enjoy them. They never have enough. Others find themselves completely overwhelmed by the attention it takes to just maintain and protect the things they have. Stone-age people had a lot of things rough, but they didn’t have a lot of stuff to worry about. Researchers tell us they worked about three hours a day and the rest was leisure. Stuff doesn’t buy us time or freedom. Even more disappointing, those who actually try to enjoy their great wealth often find that the enjoyment is hollow and unfulfilling. It simply doesn’t deliver. Money can’t buy you love, as the Beatles song goes. It can’t buy you a lot of other things, either.

So Jesus tells the story of the rich fool to pose the question, just what does all that accumulated wealth get you, anyway? Not much, it turns out. Not much.

These are important life lessons. You can’t take it with you, and all the stuff in the world won’t lead to contentment or fulfillment. All of us could benefit from taking those lessons to heart.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. Paul once said that the people needed to graduate from spiritual milk to solid food. There was nothing wrong with easily digestible spiritual milk. But spiritual solid food was even more nourishing, even if a little harder to eat. So far we’ve looked at the milk that Jesus was offering his hearers. But he was only just beginning.

“Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father’s estate with me.”

For Jesus the man’s whole problem stemmed from his beginning point, himself. Tell my brother. Divide our father’s estate. Divide it with me. The man’s appeal for fairness all begins with his self-interest. I want what’s fairly mine. I want. The starting point, rather than the idea of fairness, itself, may be what gets him into trouble.

Let me come at it this way. In John 8:32 Jesus famously says that the truth will set you free. In the most basic sense that might mean that telling the truth frees us from the burden of living within a web of lies. In a spiritual sense it might mean that seeing God truly gives us peace, maybe even salvation. The truth will set us free might mean the truth get us something.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood the problem with this way of thinking about it better than anyone I have encountered. He understood that the freedom that Jesus was talking about was not all about what it would get for us. The freedom that the truth sets you free for is freedom from oneself, not freedom for oneself. He says, “Becoming *free* does not mean becoming *great* in the

world, free in relation to our brother, free in relation to God, but [means] becoming free from oneself, from the lie that I am the only one there, that I am the center of the world.<sup>1</sup> As you may recall, this was humankind's mortal sin in the garden—that they would become like God, to know and do anything they wanted. The serpent seduced Adam and Eve to believe that freedom was all about them.

In the Germany of the early thirties Bonhoeffer understood only too well that language of God and nation and freedom were being marshaled to justify becoming great in the world. It was disastrously self-seeking but like the snake in the garden it employed rhetoric to make it sound righteous and just.

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But it wasn't about God or righteousness. It was about them, about becoming great.

So, here's the hinge, the solid food. It has everything to do with our starting point. If the starting point is our own self-seeking, if we are at the center of things, if we are the most important thing, then fairness and every other beautiful value that we can think of becomes twisted. It becomes squarely aimed at us, it is for us first and foremost. Once we make that move, as much as we may appeal to moral language, we will seek to be free for ourselves, not from ourselves. We short-circuit attention to and concern for things outside ourselves—God, other people, for example. Very quickly that allows us to hurt others even as we use high-sounding moral language to justify it. Since Adam and Eve it is one of the main things that make the world go 'round.

And Jesus understood that the vulnerability applied not just in the extreme cases but infected even very innocent looking situations. Jesus' worried about the man who wanted him to settle the family estate. The man thought that his being treated fairly would make his life right, which it wouldn't. What Jesus understood was that not only would it not make the man's life right, but that the man's insistence on self-serving fairness might very well lead to harm to him and others along the way. We have all seen the bitterness that arises in families even when everyone just wants to be treated fairly.

Now, I want to come back to this in a minute. I don't want to throw fairness entirely under the bus. But I want to think about where Jesus was trying to point the young man who came to him. He wanted to ask him, what do you think will really set you free? Is it your share of the family silver? Is it not getting taken to the cleaners by your brother? Are those the fundamental things that will define your freedom? Isn't there a fundamental flaw in that thinking?

Does not your freedom come from a radical trust in something outside yourself, something larger than yourself? God can be such an abstract word, but what Jesus was talking about here is trust in something other than ourselves, trust so deep that neither life nor death, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from it. This trust sets us free from ourselves. No matter what else happens in our lives, this trust trumps it. It sets us free to love others because we have to be less protective of ourselves. It sets us free from the world's messages about what is most important. It sets us free to rest securely in the mercy of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*, ed. Eberhard Amelung et al., trans. Anne Schmidt-Lange et al., vol. 11, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 471–472.

This shift in orientation changes everything in subtle but profound ways. The man might still bring the problem of settling the estate to the Rabbi. But the stakes would be different. The affect would be different. Standing on the solid foundation of deep trust in something beyond himself and his present situation, the man could appeal for fairness. But rather than being about what he deserves, or what would make his life wonderful, it might be about respect for his father and his wishes. It might be about love for his brother whose greed will be corrosive. It might be about the idea that fairness is a good principle to follow. But it would no longer be about the presumption that getting his due share of the estate was essential to his well-being. And that's really important, because he can't take it with him. Even while he has it here, it won't be the source of his well-being. And most important, to the degree that he thinks it will be the source of his well-being is the degree to which he will cut himself off from that true source, that in which he can truly place his trust. This is the truth that sets you free. Amen.