

"Bigger Barns"

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¹³Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴But [Jesus] said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

¹⁶Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

²⁰But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."
(Luke 12:13-21)

Admittedly, this can be a tough parable for Americans to hear, especially those of us who are living in the shadow of the city that gave rise to Gordon Gecko, the fictional financier of the 1987 movie *Wall Street*. Gecko's most famous and enduring line in the movie is widely known: "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works." It is said that Oliver Stone adapted that line from an actual statement made by the convicted felon Ivan Boesky, who said that "Greed is all right... greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself."

And yes, this story could be about greed. The rich man in this parable is clearly accumulating great amounts of grain, wealth, and material goods. Maybe greed is part of what is going on here, but note that Jesus never says that. Jesus simply says that the man's farms were producing abundantly, he ran out of storage space, so he was pondering some new infrastructure. It seems that hard work and good fortune has created a wonderful problem. What else should he do or could he do but build bigger barns? So we might say exactly what Gecko and Boesky would say. Isn't this good? Isn't this healthy? Shouldn't this man feel good about how well he is doing?

And yet the parable makes it very clear that God does not think this is good, or right, or healthy. In fact, God's assessment of this businessman's work is summed up in one Greek adjective: ἀφρων (*aphrón*), which means this: mindless, ignorant, egotistical, rash, unwise, foolish.¹ God calls the man a fool. So what is the problem?

Well, we have to say first that the problem is not WHAT the farmer did. We know this from the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis. If you remember, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. Ending up in Egypt, he works his way up, through hard work and ability, all the way up into the house of Pharaoh. And when deadly famine rears its head, Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of grain management for the whole kingdom. So what did Joseph do? He built barns -- lots and lots of barns. He also created a process for controlling consumption and storing surpluses in the barns he built. This complex and demanding job required him to manage production efficiency, forecast market trends, keep detailed records, acquire and develop real estate, and manage payroll expenses. And, as it turned out, Joseph was a brilliant businessman. His gifts not only saved the

¹ https://biblehub.com/greek/aphro_n_878.htm



country of Egypt, but many other countries also affected by the famine. And all of this was pleasing to God. All of this was part of God's plan to save people in need.

So God does not have a problem with barn building *per se*. It is not WHAT this man did that made him a fool. The problem was WHY he did it.

So why did he do it? The answer is right here in the words, right here in the parable itself. "*I will build bigger barns,*" the man says, "*so I can say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*" That's why he did it, and that's where he went wrong. And I would break that WHY down into two parts: he saw the barns as (1) his ***ticket to happiness*** and (2) his ***guarantee of security***.

Let's take happiness first. When his barns are finally full of wealth and stuff, the man thinks, then he would be able to "*eat, drink, be merry.*" He would be able to enjoy the good life for the long haul. Now, at this point, I could certainly quote time-tested studies, scientific experiments proving that money and material success can take us only so far when it comes to happiness... that there is a threshold at which the accumulation of more wealth actually begins to diminish our emotional well-being. These studies suggest that this tipping point is way lower than we might imagine.

But I would rather focus this morning on the spiritual and biblical justifications for calling this man a fool. And that begins with the Exodus passage we read earlier this morning. When the nation of Israel was at risk of dying of hunger in the wilderness of Sinai, God fed them with manna from heaven. You will have plenty to eat, God said, but you are to gather only what you need "for that day." The only exception was the sixth day, when they were allowed to collect enough for that current day plus the sabbath day. This ethical mandate was reinforced by a built-in expiration date. The manna was delicious when fresh, but if anyone tried to store it up, the sweet flaky manna would turn to nasty, smelly, maggot-ridden mush overnight.

The fact that this provision of life-saving food was set to the seven-fold pattern of creation – six days of daily labor, plus a seventh day of rest and respite – means that God's way of providing for our daily needs is woven into the basic fabric and pattern of creation. God will take care of us, but that care is given day by day.

And Christ makes it clear that this pattern is not just an Old Testament thing. As he taught us, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "give us this day our daily bread."² We do not ask for an advance on a weekly supply, let alone a lifetime supply. We ask for what we need on this day, and for no more. "*Look at the birds of the air,*" Jesus says. "*They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?*"³ The steadfast faithfulness of God promises to provide us with what we need for today, and we are called to trust that what is enough for today is indeed enough. This trust is embedded in the order of creation and woven into our relationship with God.

An ancient Jewish midrash from the second century helps to explain why this pattern exists. Students asked their rabbi a logical question: "Why didn't God offer the manna to Israel once a year instead of every day?" Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai answered with a story of a mortal king who had a son. When the king provided the son with his sustenance once a year, the rabbi taught, the son visited his father only once a year. But when the father began to provide him with his sustenance daily, the son had to call on his father every day. So it was, the rabbi explained, with Israel... in gathering the manna each morning, the Israelites were compelled to direct their hearts to their Father in heaven every day.⁴ This arrangement is a key to true happiness, the positive affirmation and fulfillment we feel when we are connected daily to our Creator, our loving divine parent.

² Luke 11:3.

³ Matthew 6:26.

⁴ *The Book of Legends/Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), p. 75.

We are also happier when we are connected to other people. As Biblical scholar Dr. Elizabeth Johnson has observed, “When the rich man talks in this parable, he talks only to himself, and the only person he refers to is himself.” “What should *I* do,” he asks, “for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?” *I* will pull down *my* barns. *I* will build *myself* larger ones, so *I* can store all *my* grain and *my* goods.”⁵ It is obvious that the rich man was focused entirely on himself. Going back to the example of Joseph, God was pleased because Joseph did not build his barns as a blessing for himself. Joseph built Egypt’s barns as a blessing for a nation and for the world.

By contrast, this rich man planned his barns as a monument to himself. He refused to trust that God would provide what he needed day by day, and he cut himself off from God and from other people with a plan to fill his own belly and create a more selfish brand of happiness. And for that, God called him a fool.

But what about the other half of his rationale? The other thing the rich man said was that storing up wealth in bigger barns would help him to “relax.” They would allow him to take it easy and live a care free life. And what does longing for a carefree life suggest? It suggests that this man, like all of us, had very real cares and worries, things that made him feel afraid. In his mind, more stuff stored up in bigger barns could form a ring of defense, a wall to protect him from the threats and dangers he feared the most.

This kind of fear avoidance is the basis for what we call “hoarding.” The documented emotional disorder, which is marked by extreme difficulty in discarding old items coupled with excessive acquiring of additional items, is essentially an emotional response to fear. If someone suffering from this disorder thinks about getting rid of something, they are immediately gripped with a terrible fear that they might need that item next week. If it has any sentimental value, they may also fear that discarding the item is like discarding an irreplaceable memory or a cherished relationship. The clutter just keeps building and building as they try to avoid these worries and fears.⁶

The irony for the rich farmer is that all he did to avoid his fears came to nought. His barns could neither hold back death nor dictate its timing. And death is not the only worry that money cannot extinguish. This truth has been expressed in many ways, but this one speaks to me: “Money can buy a bed, but not rest; a clock, but not time; medicine, but not health; weapons, but not peace; a book, but not knowledge; a position, but not purpose; amusements, but not happiness; a house, but not a home.” In the end, the fact that this farmer bought into the delusion that his barns could guarantee his security left him looking like a fool.

It bears repeating that the problem was not what the rich farmer did. The problem was why he chose to do it. His purpose in building bigger barns was to store up treasures for himself. What he should have done, to use the concluding words of the parable, was to “be rich toward God.” What that looks like, how its done, means different things for different people. All kinds of work, all kinds of careers, all kinds of projects, study, acts of kindness can be rich toward God. It is not what we do, but why we do it that counts.

So, if we want to build up spiritual riches, things that matter to heaven, then the question we need to be asking ourselves all the time is WHY. Whatever our plans may be, WHY are we doing this? If we are hoping something will make us happy, ask these WHY questions:

- Is our goal in this action to connect with God?
- By doing this, are we hoping to deepen our relationships with other people?
- Is part of our purpose in this action to help others?
- Is our intent to share the blessings God has given us with others?

⁵Elizabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Luke 12:13-21,” www.workingpreacher.org, August 1, 2025.

⁶<https://med.stanford.edu/rodriguezlab/hoarding-resources/about-hoarding-disorder.html>

And when it comes to our safety and security, the first question is WHY we are afraid:

- Could this plan of action be a reaction against something we fear? If so, what is it?
- If we are trying to avoid this worry, why are we not trusting God in this particular case?
- Why do we think we can protect ourselves from worries that no amount of money can prevent?

When we set our minds on doing something, if we just start with the WHY there is a much better chance that the barns we build... the work we do... the things we try to accomplish... will not be self-serving or foolish. Instead of storing up things that will rust, decay, or amount to nothing, we will be storing up treasures in heaven. And when it comes to storing those, the barns you build can never be too big. ***Amen.***