

“When God Used a Four-Letter Word”

Luke 12:13-21

Series: Kingdom Come Week 4 Share Your Stuff

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

The Woodside Church

October 18, 2020

John Ortberg tried to teach his children the value of money.

When our kids were little, we put them on the envelope system. When we gave them an allowance, they would put it in envelopes labeled "Give," "Save," "Gifts," and "Spend."

I thought it was working until one day I had a Band-Aid on my arm. My daughter, who at that time was about six, asked, "Why?" I explained I had a medical exam that day to get life insurance. She asked, "What's that?" I explained, "Well, Daddy loves you so much and loves the family so much, so if anything were to happen to Daddy (which of course it won't, but if it would), life insurance would provide \$250,000." She has a tender heart, and I knew she'd be worried. She looked up at me with really wide eyes and said, "Each?" I'm not sure the right lesson is getting communicated.¹

Greed starts young. In our series Kingdom Come, Jesus' parables are teaching us how we enter and live as citizens of the Kingdom of heaven here on earth. The first week we learned we must **Surrender** to Jesus as our King. Next, through the parable of the sower, Jesus teaches us to **Sow Big**. We must not give up on others as we share His Good News through our words and deeds. Last week, through a powerful message on the Good Samaritan, Martha Stringer said we must push past barriers and biases to **Stop and Help** those wounded on the road of life.

In today's parable, Jesus teaches us the next Kingdom practice: **Share Your Stuff**. One of the first lessons we are taught is to share. Unfortunately, one of the first words we learn is "Mine!" The one sin most people abhor, but few can admit is Greed. In a Zogby poll a few years ago respondents identified "greed/materialism" as the number one "most urgent problem in American culture." Yet most people think it's someone else's problem. In a poll on the seven deadly sins, the BBC asked: "Which sin have you ever committed?" Greed came in last. What is Greed? One definition is an "intense and selfish desire for something, especially wealth, power, or status. An inordinate desire to acquire or possess more than one needs." Why is it so hard to see greed in our lives?

We Confuse Wants With Needs. We think we need more and more stuff. Storage facilities are exploding. In 2019 the self-storage industry made \$39.5 billion in revenue a 50% increase from 2010. There are 1.7 billion sq. ft. of storage space or 5.4 sq. ft. of storage for each man, woman and child in America. The average size of American houses is growing while the average size of the American family is shrinking. So houses are getting bigger, families are getting smaller, and we still need over a billion extra square feet for our stuff.²

We Think Abundant Stuff Means Abundant Life. An article in The Atlantic demonstrated how, in the last 100 years, we turned yesterday's luxuries into today's necessities.

¹ John Ortberg, "The Ten Financial Commandments,"

² <https://www.sparefoot.com/self-storage/news/1432-self-storage-industry-statistics/>

Today, at least 90 percent of the country has a stove, electricity, car, fridge, clothes washer, air-conditioning, color TV, microwave, and cell phone. They make our lives better. They might even make us happier. But they are never enough.³

Now I appreciate all these modern conveniences, but it seems we always want the next brighter, faster, cooler piece of technology. Once we have it, we can't live without it but it's never enough. Contrast that with the people in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. When mission teams return, they are often surprised at how joyful our Christian brothers and sisters are. Now the DR and Haiti are not paradise. They have disease, corruption, lack of clean water, and every door and window is barred. There is a lot to be unhappy about. What surprises us is how they can be so joyful when they don't have all the stuff we have. We have storage rooms full of stuff and are discontent, while Christians there have almost nothing and dance with joy. Why doesn't it add up? We think abundant stuff means abundant life.

We Compare Ourselves with Wealthier People. Bloomberg News recently reported the 50 richest Americans now hold almost as much wealth as the poorest 50% of Americans – about 165 million people. Compared to these fifty we're not rich. But we are rich compared to the vast majority of people who have less. These facts are hard to hear but please don't tune them out.

Americans are less than 5% of the world's population but we own 20% of the world's wealth.

One billion people in the world do not have access to clean water, while the average American uses four to six hundred liters of water a day.

More than half of the world lives on less than two dollars a day, while the average American teenager spends over \$150 a week.

Forty percent of people in the world lack basic sanitation. 1.6 billion people in the world have no electricity.

Nearly one hundred million children are denied basic education. One in seven children worldwide (158 million) has to go to work every day just to survive.

Every seven seconds, somewhere in the world, a child under age five dies of hunger, while Americans throw away 14 percent of the food we purchase.⁴

Now you can argue with these facts and deny their truth. You can throw up your hands and say the problem is too big. You can say you do your part for the poor and it's time for someone else to step up. Or you and I can see how our abundance can be part of the solution.

Jesus has a lot to say about greed and how to handle money. Sixteen of His thirty-eight parables deal with money and possession. Why? Jesus knows how easy it is for greed to turn money or possessions into idols. Case in point: a man interrupts Jesus with this demand,

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” (Luke 12:13)

³ Derek Thompson, "The 100-Year March of Technology in 1 Graph," *The Atlantic* (4-7-12).

⁴ Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* (Zondervan, 2008), pp. 122-123.

He orders Jesus to take his side in a family quarrel. It's not surprising to see an inheritance divide a family. Where there's a will, there are relatives. Jesus refuses to be drawn into the fray.

Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" (Luke 12:14)

Jesus came to reconcile not divide. He doesn't care about inheritance but about the inner heart. He teaches **Abundant Stuff Does Not Give Abundant Life**.

Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15)

Jesus warns us to be on the lookout for greed. We must protect our hearts from the attack of greed just as we protect our bodies from the invading corona virus. Don't catch a case of *influenza*. It will deceive you into believing a full house of possessions equals a full life. Chuck Colson's home town Naples, Florida, has twenty-seven golf courses.

I watch these retired CEOs of major corporations; they're powerful people. But now, all of a sudden, they start measuring their lives by how many golf games they can get in. I often say to them, "Do you really want to live your life counting up the number of times you chase that little white ball around those greens?" And they kind of chuckle, but it's a nervous chuckle, because in six months they realize they're miserable. The object of life is not to achieve money, power, pleasure. That's not the Holy Grail. The object of life is the maturing of the soul, and you reflect that maturing of the soul when you care more for other people than yourself.⁵

This is why Jesus says that **Abundant Life Is Sharing With Others**. Jesus teaches this through a negative example of what not to do.

And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."' (Luke 12:16-19)

This has all the signs of an American success story: abundant produce, strategic planning, careful savings, early retirement to a life of leisure. The rich man is ready to live happily ever after.

Yet that day never comes. For that very night, the thundering voice of God calls him a four-letter word: FOOL! Fool? What did this shrewd businessman do that was so foolish? Look more carefully at the parable. First, when the story begins he is already rich. So the abundant harvest is a surplus. He can't even find a self-storage unit for it. He doesn't think about sharing God's gift with his hungry neighbors. St. Ambrose once said he has plenty of room to store the grain in the mouths of the needy. Instead he builds bigger barns to keep it for himself.

⁵Eric Metaxas, *Socrates in the City* (Dutton, 2011), pp. 172-3

Second, did you catch the loneliness of this man? He only talks to himself. There are no family and friends to share his fortune. Perhaps his selfishness drove them away. Like Howard Hughes, he is lonely in the midst of his wealth. It's hard to eat, drink and be merry by yourself.

Yet he is most foolish when he thinks everything belongs to him. Did you notice how he says, 'my crops, my grain, my goods, my barns, my soul?' He believes they are all his possessions to enjoy as he pleases to the end of his days. That end comes sooner than he expects.

But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:20-21)

Why does God call him foolish? These things are not his to keep. Tonight he must give them all up including his soul. The literal meaning of this verse is: 'Tonight I am calling in the loan on your life.' The central point of this parable is: all our possessions, even our lives, are **owned** by God, but **loaned** to us. We can't hold on to anything forever. He is foolish to keep it all to himself when he could have shared some with others. When God called in the loan on his life, he lost his crops, goods, barns, soul. Greed made him think abundant stuff means abundant life.

To break the chain of greed, to receive God's abundant life, you and I must share our lives with others, especially those in need. That's what Jesus did. Paul says,

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. 2 Corinthians 8:9

He gave his life for us on the cross. No greater gift was ever given. No higher price ever paid. Receive this gift of abundant life from the hand of Jesus. But don't keep it to yourself. As He gave His life to you, share your life with others. Give the precious gift of your time, your God-given talents, and the treasure God loaned you. Share your stuff with others.

You have the opportunity to do that this week when you make a pledge to God's work at Woodside in 2021. What difference do you make when you spend a little less on yourself and share more with others? You help homeless families who have no place to turn. Our building was not closed last summer even though we couldn't be here. We hosted Family Promise. One father who graduated from the program into an apartment on September 1 said:

"That was beyond my vocabulary! I have nothing to describe how incredible I felt. I cried on my sleeping baby, I was so happy laying there just saying over and over again I'm really home."

When you share generously we are able to care for those who are fighting on the frontlines of the Corona virus. Sue Harris-Miller, Tom Fowler and their teams formed Feeding Hungry Heroes. They packed 4,279 lunches for dozens of organizations.

When you share generously we are able to raise a home for those struggling to make ends meet. On June 1, 2019 over a hundred volunteers swung hammers and raised walls until the frame of a new Habitat for Humanity house filled the back lot of Woodside. Among the workers

were the future owners Damian and Joanne. Their dream of moving their two boys from a cramped unsafe apartment into a home was becoming a reality. At the home dedication they said,

“We thank God first because he changed our lives especially our salvation. And now he decided to bless us with a house. I will never forget that day when over 100 volunteers came and built the frame of our home. This is something I will cherish and remember forever. Thank you so much for all the financial support and everybody who volunteered.”

Woodside is all about helping people find their way home – physically and spiritually. Your generous gifts make this possible. We can't do it without you. When you grow in your giving we can do even more for those in need.

Please use the enclosed card to make a pledge to God's work at Woodside in 2021. You can fill it out and make your commitment today or spend this week praying about what you will give. For every pledge we receive by October 25. we'll donate \$10 to Urban Promise Trenton which helps inner city kids receive faith, hope and a future.

We can build bigger storage sheds for our stuff, or we can share our God given gifts and build homes and hope for others.