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A MOST ATTRACTIVE POISON
Luke 12:13-21

You've probably heard this little story, but it's worth repeating. A young boy's grandparents retired and moved away. After a visit to his newly retired grandparents he wrote a paper for school describing the visit and the change that had happened in his family.

He wrote about grandpa and grandma, "They used to live in a big brick house, but Grandpa got retarded and they moved to Arizona. Now they live in a condo and have rocks painted green to look like grass. They ride around in a golf cart and wear name tags because they don't know who they are any more. They go to a building called a wrecked center, but they must have got it fixed because it's all okay now. They play games and do exercises there, but they don't do them very well. At their gate there is a little dollhouse with a man sitting in it. He watches all day so nobody can escape. Nobody cooks there. They all eat out, and they eat the same thing every night – early birds. My Grandma says Grandpa worked hard all his life to earn his retardment and says I should work hard so I can be retarded someday too. When I earn my retardment I want to be the man in the dollhouse. Then I will let people out so they can visit their grandchildren."

Today we are going to look at a parable from Jesus about a man who planned a retirement that didn't include a wrecked center or a doll house, but it did miss out on some very important things. His story, which is told in Luke 12:13-21 will teach us a lot about life and where it found.

JESUS' STORY WAS PROMPTED BY A DISPUTE

According to Luke 12:1 this incident took place on a day when a huge crowd had gathered to hear Jesus speak. There were many thousands there, so many that they were stepping on each other. Jesus is going to talk about the future and how we are to think about it. But what sparks this discourse is a request from a member of his audience. According to verse 13 a man in the audience says to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

We don't know the specifics of this man's situation, but we can make some inferences. Apparently the patriarch of the family, the brothers' dad, had died. This man was clearly the younger brother. He had to deal with the albatross of younger brothers throughout history, being frustrated by their bigger, stronger, domineering

older brothers. However in the culture of Jesus' day the issue was even bigger because the eldest brother became the new patriarch of the family. He received a larger part of the estate and had the power to handle the division of assets. In this case big brother apparently didn't want to divide the family land, flocks and herds. Evidently he thought the most lucrative way to handle the family enterprise was to keep all the assets in one business and for the brothers to work it together.

The younger brother didn't want that. Maybe he believed that the older brother wouldn't treat him fairly if they had to share the business. Or it could have been that little brother was headstrong and was sure that he knew better than big brother how to run things. He was convinced that he'd make a lot more money if he were able to do things his way, so he wanted the freedom to go out on his own.

Initially when we read the younger brother's request we might think it was a plea for justice. We might think little bro is asking Jesus to render judgment. But that's not what was happening. Pay attention to what the man said. He didn't submit the brothers' dispute to Jesus for his determination of what would be best. He said, "Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." In other words, make him do what I want. He's not asking for Jesus to render a wise decision, he's trying to enlist him on his side of the argument.

This is one of those little incidents from the Bible that speak to its authenticity. This is exactly what human beings do. In many years of ministry I have had the unfortunate experience of having Christians involved in disputes appeal to me for assistance. I've had to deal with both financial and personal disputes. It is rare, if it has ever happened, for someone to come to me, explain the basics of a dispute and say, "If you would be willing I would like you to arbitrate this dispute and I will accept whatever you decide." It has always been, "tell the other guy that he's wrong and he needs to accept what I think is right." Sadly, the most common outcome of such situations has been that I've insisted on not getting involved on one side or the other but try to be impartial and get on the parties to focus on loving each other and treating each other as brothers in Christ. This has typically resulted in the parties being upset with me and in most cases leaving the church.

Jesus' response to the request is instructive. Instead of getting embroiled in their controversy he chose to deal with the real issue. When he said, "who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" he was refusing to take little brother's side or even to render a decision in their case. He said, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." The solution to the problem was not for Jesus to gang up with one brother against another. It was for them to deal with their greed

problem. If they did that the dispute would go away. This is true of most of our disputes and conflicts with people. If we deal with our selfish heart issues, the disputes will be easily resolved or even disappear.

Jesus was saying this fellow, and quite likely his brother, had a problem with greed. Greed can take a lot of different forms. It can exist for a lot of different things and it can appear in different ways, but according to Jesus all of them are bad. How did Jesus know this fellow had a problem with greed? It could be that as the Son of God he knew things about people that we might not know. That happened in his life on multiple occasions. But in this case I don't think there was anything supernatural about it. This man has gone to war with his own brother. What is the cause of that battle? It's about money. I can already hear him. "It's not the money, it's the principle of the thing." No it's not. It's the money. James 4:1 says, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" That is precisely what was happening between the brothers. We need to grasp that when we have a conflict with someone we are greedy for something.

No matter what the younger brother in this incident might say, getting what he wanted, and ultimately that came down to more money for him, was more important to him than his relationship with his own brother. He was showing he would resort to whatever levers he could access to force his brother to give him what he wanted. He has placed money above love, above his own brother, and that, my friends is nothing but greed.

Jesus makes this clear when he says, "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Suppose the man was able to get his way and become very wealthy, but in the process he destroyed his relationship with his brother. Would that make his life full and joyous? No it would not. In what he was doing he was saying, "I'd rather have my inheritance and my money than a close relationship with my brother." That's how greed works. It puts what it wants above people, above serving God. Jesus claimed by his statement that is not a formula for a full life. It is just the opposite.

Pay attention to the words Jesus used. "Watch out!" When do you say those words? It is when something bad is about to happen to someone. You're at the baseball game and a foul ball comes screaming into the seats and you yell "Watch out." Someone is standing on a ladder that is unbalanced and it begins to tip over. You yell "watch out." It is what you say when someone is about to get hurt. The point is that greed is dangerous because it is going to hurt you.

Jesus strengthens that message by telling us to guard against greed. What do you guard against? We try to have good passwords to guard access to online banking accounts. When someone calls us and has an offer that sounds suspicious we are immediately “on guard.” We guard ourselves because we think we might get hurt if we don’t.

Let’s be clear, greed is dangerous to us. Jesus is warning that greed is toxic. A bottle of greed today would have a skull and crossbones on it. The dictionary defines “toxic” as having the effect of a poison, and that is just what greed does. It poisons our souls. It kills us spiritually; it deadens our souls and makes us dead to God. It can and does poison our relationships. Greed always divides people. We see that in this story in Luke 12. Two brothers are now divided and the reason is greed. In his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (p. 303) Ken Bailey wrote, “the more wealth people acquire, the farther they generally withdraw from their neighbors.” This dividing effect of money is verified by the fact that the number one source of conflict for married couples is money. On average they argue about money three times a month.

I had a friend and roommate in college named Miles who was from a very wealthy family. He had a new Pontiac Firebird, which back then was in the class of the Mustang and the Camaro. At Christmas break while I went home to Bakersfield he went skiing in Switzerland with his family. His family owned a huge house in a very pricey area of West L.A. I felt out of place the one weekend I spent there because of all the servants who waited on us. Expensive private college tuition was no problem for this family. Money simply was so abundant a shortage of it was never an issue for them. They also had a “weekend” home on an island in Newport Bay. It was right on the sand and had its own dock. It was also huge. Money was never a problem for them. Several years after I had graduated we had lost touch but I was in Newport Beach with a friend. I decided to go by and look at Miles’ family’s beach house. As we were walking around a man I didn’t recognize came out of the house and asked if he could help us. I explained who I was and asked if Miles happened to be around. He wasn’t, but the man introduced himself as Miles’ uncle. He was very gracious and invited us into the house to chat and to see the place. As we were talking he began to tell me the story of what had happened in the years Miles and I had been out of touch. Miles’ mother committed suicide. It turned out that the largest chunk of the family money came from her, and, unfortunately she left two wills. Miles had two brothers. The older will left everything to Miles’ dad. The more recent will divided it four ways, equal parts going to the three brothers and the father. At that time the matter was in court because the father insisted the older will was valid but the boys were certain the

more recent will was the valid one. The boys were suing their father to get what they felt was their share of the money. That's what greed will do. It always divides. I'll say again, greed, in all its forms, always divides.

There is a sad coda to the story of Miles' family. Out of the blue Miles called me about 5 years ago. I never found out how the suit about the wills turned out. It seemed irrelevant because by that time all the family money was gone. That seemingly endless pool of wealth had totally dried up in the space of one generation.

None of us thinks we're greedy. Well known author and pastor Tim Keller did a series of talks at his church on the seven deadly sins. Those sins are things like sloth, gluttony, envy, lust, pride and so on. Guess which talk got the lowest attendance. It was greed. No one thinks of himself or herself as greedy. But let's remember what greed is really about. When we think life really comes from some thing we are greedy for that thing. When having that thing is more important to us than knowing and honoring God, we are greedy. When having that thing is more important to us than loving other people, we are greedy.

JESUS' STORY DEPICTS THE FOOLISHNESS OF GREED

The story is a simple one. It features a successful farmer who was already rich, had his barn and silos for storing crop all in place. But then God gave him an enormous crop, bigger than he had ever had before. This was such a bumper crop that it was enough for him to retire on, but he couldn't fit all of it in his storage buildings. What should he do? His solution to the problem was easy. Tear down his existing barns and build new ones, bigger ones. This is the truly American way of thinking. Your restaurant is doing well, so well that it's producing way more income than you ever thought possible. What should you do? Open a second one, of course. And when that one's doing well you go for a third. Pretty soon you've got a string of restaurants. Then you sell out to Outback, which also owns the Carraba's Italian Grill chain, Fleming's steakhouses and Roy's. You're set for life. His was an American success story.

So that's what he does. He knows he is set for life. He says to himself, "This is great. I've got all the money I'll ever need. I can retire early. I can eat, drink and be merry. I can buy a vacation home in Hawaii, get myself a big boat, maybe get a ski chalet up at Park City, own the Ferrari I've always wanted and really enjoy life. That makes all kinds of sense to us. Isn't that what everybody would like to have? He had financial security and independence. Who wouldn't want to be able to retire and do whatever you feel like? Isn't that everyone's goal, even though few of

us will reach it? Hey, the guy deserved it. He worked his farm well and that's his reward.

What happens next in the story is shocking. God shows up and says to him, "You fool. Tonight your soul will be demanded of you." In other words, your life is over. So what good are the boat, the Ferrari, the vacation homes going to do you now? Jesus says, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." In other words, everyone who follows in the rich man's footsteps will suffer the same fate.

Well that seems a bit harsh, doesn't it? Didn't the guy in the story just do what seems like common sense and prudence? Work hard and save for the future and eventually you will reap the fruit of your labor and be able to enjoy it, taking it as easy as you'd like. What's so wrong with that? In fact, isn't what this guy ended up doing a good description of a successful retirement program? Is God against retirement?

It certainly doesn't sound like it in Proverbs. Proverbs 6:6-8 says, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest." That seems to commend this idea of working hard and saving for the future like the rich man. Proverbs 21:20 says, "In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has." That also seems to say storing up for the future is a good thing. So how are we to understand what Jesus means by this story?

This man failed to understand a couple of crucial ideas. These ideas are hard for us to grasp and remember, but they are enormously important. The first problem he had is that he failed to understand that life does not consist of possessions and comfort. He believed he would have the good life by just kicking back and enjoying all the things his money could buy. That is the good life. And we can all relate to that. When people speak of "the good life" what does it entail typically? A big, luxurious home, cool cars, great swimming pool, fine dining, vacation in the tropics, leisure time with no stress, plenty of opportunity to pursue one's favorite pastimes, interests and hobbies, essentially no limits financially.

Jesus specifically identified this as a problem in verse 15. What is going to bring us real life? I am sure you can identify with me on this. I have experienced some difficult times. Before I got married I was in school and working to support myself. I had no money. I had a car that I was never sure would run. I lived in a sketchy

apartment with furniture that the Salvation Army turned down. I was continually right on the edge of financial meltdown. After we got married things didn't get much better. Things were still tight financially and paying bills caused me stress every time I had to do it. Vacations were trips to Bakersfield or going down to San Diego and staying a couple of nights in a crummy motel. I remember our first Christmas together Laurie and I bought a Christmas tree. We couldn't afford much. The tree we decided on was reminiscent of Charlie Brown's tree. As we were about to pay for it a woman who was buying a much nicer tree looked at us and said, "are you really buying that weak thing?" Not having any money just made life difficult and stressful.

Things are better now. Our kids are grown. This church has been generous to us. We don't fear our car breaking down or an appliance failing and knowing the only way we can deal with it is to put it on a credit card because we have no money. We actually having a little bit of money in a savings account. Honestly this makes life easier. Paying bills is still no fun but it doesn't ruin my week. It's more fun to be able to on occasion go out to Borrelli's or Islands instead of Carl's Jr. I know this may shock some of you, but I am going to confess that going to Maui for a vacation is a lot more fun than Bakersfield. I admit the doughnuts in Bakersfield are better, but other than that there's no comparison. So we learn that having stuff in this world is way better than not having stuff. Being important and successful is better than being insignificant and a failure. Being healthy is better than being sick. Acceptance and approval are better than rejection. Plenty to eat is better than going hungry.

That's just reality. But that reality can cause us to think that fullness, peace and joy in life derive from having all of that. We are convinced of it. It is like a given we never question. But Jesus says that is in fact not where life comes from. Life does not consist of the abundance of one's possessions. Joy and peace come from another source. If you look around you will see that life confirms this.

There are people in this world who have none of the things that we think are necessary for a full and peaceful life, yet they are full of joy and life. That reality proves that life does not come from stuff. Our experience confirms it. Our early days of marriage were hardly overflowing with wealth, yet my recollection of those days was that we were quite happy and joyful. There was fullness of life back then just as there is today. The other side of the coin is that it is easy to also find people who have everything the world thinks is the source of life and they are miserable and unhappy. Easier and full are not synonymous.

In his book, *A Hole In The Gospel*, Richard Stearns, president of Christian relief organization, World Vision tells of his experience in 1987. Given the financial cataclysms of recent years it doesn't seem as drastic, but on Black Monday, October 19, 1987 the stock market suffered the largest single day crash since 1929. He and his wife Renee lost more than a third of their life's savings and their kids' college funds. He said he became obsessed with the loss. He was in anguish, he stayed up late at night poring over spreadsheets trying to figure out ways to stop the bleeding. Finally his wife couldn't take it anymore. She said, "This is consuming you. It's unhealthy. We have much to be thankful for. God loves us. We have our health, our marriage, our kids, our friends. We need to trust God." She suggested they pray about it together. He hadn't considered that idea. So they prayed and when they were done his wife said, "Now I think we need to get out the checkbook and write some big checks to some ministries that we support. We need to show God we know this isn't our money, it's his, and that we trust him." Stearns was flabbergasted, but finally admitted she was right. They did. And when he put those checks in envelopes and sealed them he said he experienced a wave of relief. He said it was like the money had put a spell on him, and writing those checks broke the spell. He said he felt free and giddy.

A second thing the rich man in Jesus' story failed to understand was that his life and everything in it belongs to God. Take note of the word "demanded" in verse 20. The Greek word used there is one that literally means to "demand back." It's a word that was used when someone had loaned something and asked for it back.

Years ago our family had the opportunity to house sit for Laurie's cousin Linda Henderson and her family who lived in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. We basically borrowed their house and their car for a month. We had a blast vacationing there for that month. But we never forgot that house was not ours. We were diligent to take care of it and we never forgot that at the end of that month we were going to have to give it back to the Hendersons.

What Jesus says here can and should have radical impact on how we think about our lives. It means that our lives and everything in them has been *loaned* to us by God! It is not ours to do with whatever we jolly well please. It is God's. He is graciously letting us use our lives and all the possessions and gifts we have, but they do not belong to us. They are his, so we are to be careful how we take care of them and we are always to know that at some point he will ask for them back.

This is where our rich friend utterly flopped. Saving for the future is wise and prudent, but it is not to be our main goal nor the focus of our lives. Having

sufficient to be able to support ourselves and not be ever stressed is nice, but it is not to be the focus either. Where the rich man failed royally was that he was not rich toward God. He took what was loaned to him and used it however suited him. He never gave thought to what God would have him do with his life and the blessings God gave him. There was only one factor in his deliberations and choices, and that was “what do I want to do?” It never occurred to him that maybe what God wanted was to use his abundance not to fund his “good life,” but to be generous and giving to others, to bring them a little help and joy.

How do you think it would have gone over if we had trashed the Hendersons house or if we decided we didn’t like the décor and while we were staying there we had it painted? We could say, “Well that’s what we wanted to do,” but it would have been wrong. We didn’t have the right to do whatever we wanted. The house didn’t belong to us. And we don’t have the right to do whatever we want with our lives, possessions and blessings. Our first and most important factor in our choices must always be, “what does God want me to do with this, because it is his after all.”

IMPLICATIONS

LET GOD RULE YOUR RETIREMENT FUTURE

Is it wrong to plan to retire some day? Not necessarily, but we need to think correctly about retirement. The world’s view of retirement is, “I’ve earned it, so now I’ve got the chance to do whatever I want.” So like this guy it’s about eating, drinking and taking it easy. It’s moving to that retirement community, playing golf and bingo and talking about our most recent surgery.

God is not down on anyone finally being free of the burden of having to work every day. But life is not to be about “now I can do whatever I want.” You don’t retire from the fact that your life isn’t yours. Even if you’re retired your life belongs to God. The same question that rules our lives before we retire should rule our lives afterward. That question is, “what does God want me to do?” Yes, you are more free if you can retire, but you should see yourself as more free to work for God’s kingdom and to bring him glory day in and day out.

There’s a man named Sam Duree who is a retired pastor, now age 77. In his retirement he spends 4 hours a day planning, sawing, sanding, drilling, gluing and nailing. He builds birdhouses. He has 35 different kinds that he makes. He takes them to festivals and craft shows where he sells them. He does this as a way of raising money to support a seminary in Russia. He estimates he has built 3000 of them and raised \$85,000 for the seminary. He’s retired, but he’s still working to build God’s kingdom.

Yes, but how much should I be putting aside for retirement? I cannot tell you what is right for you. That's between you and God. What I can tell you is that you must not make that the focus of your life and you must ask him what he wants you to do.

FOCUS ON THE REAL SOURCE OF LIFE

So many people have ideas about what they think will bring them life. Chief among them is success, having lots of money, fame. We should listen to those who have gained those things and consistently report that it is not enough. Some young people especially think they're going to find life in partying, having sex with lots of different people. They will find that all that produces is emptiness, regret and guilt. It never has produced life and never will.

The funny thing is we know that pursuing selfish ends always leaves us empty. Every one of us has experienced it. The late Charles Colson who lived in Florida reported that he saw it all the time. Where he lived there were many fabulously wealthy people who retired. They had it all. They were successful and now could relax in a place where there is warm weather, sun, beaches and golf courses. He says after 6 months they realized how banal their lives are, they get bored and they're miserable.

In a passage dealing with widows Paul makes a profound comment in 1 Timothy 5:6. "The widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives." That is true not just of widows but of all of us. If we live to please ourselves we will end up dead inside.

Psalms 16:11 says to God, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." What will give us the life we long for? It is knowing that God is with us and caring for us so we can be at peace. It is knowing that he loves and forgives us so we can have joy and hope. It is knowing that he has something for us to do every day of our lives. In all things, big or small he wants us to honor him and to build his kingdom. In loving others, in serving him we find meaning and fullness of life.

Steve Lohr wrote an article 2 years ago in the *New York Times* in which he mentioned a conversation he once had with the late Steve Jobs of Apple Computers fame. The conversation happened in the late 1990's when the dot com craze was at its hottest. Jobs expressed disdain with all the young entrepreneurs he saw around him who were focused on their "exit strategy" of selling their companies for a huge profit. He said, "It's such a small ambition and sad really. They should want to

build something, something that lasts.” We should want that too, and there is nothing as lasting as the kingdom of God.

NEVER FORGET THE PURPOSE OF WEALTH

God has loaned us some things. He has loaned us a life. He has loaned us abilities. He has loaned us families and friends. He has loaned us time. He has loaned us possessions, money, houses, cars, and all the rest. They belong to him. At some point he is going to ask for them all back. But here’s the crucial question: why has he loaned them to us? What does he want us to do with them?

I will give you two passages of Scripture that point us in the direction of the answer. In 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul talks about what we typically refer to as spiritual gifts. He brought this issue up because the Corinthians had turned those gifts inward. They had made them about themselves. They thought they were about proving they were more spiritual and blessed than others and about feeling good. Paul spent 3 chapters straightening them out. The gifts weren’t about themselves, they were given to them so they could use them to love and bless others. This is always what God wants to use his blessings for.

Then we can look at 2 Corinthians 9:11. Same group of people, different subject, same problem. This time the subject was money. Again they pretty much thought the money God gave them was purely for their own benefit. But in this verse Paul says, “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.” Why did God give them money? So they could be generous. In other words, once again, so they could love and bless other people with it.

You and I are wealthy. We must never forget that God hasn’t blessed us just so we can be comfortable. He has something he wants us to do with our wealth, our possessions, our gifts, our talents. He wants us to use them to bless others. Here’s the irony in the whole thing. It is in using what he gives us to bless, in giving away and serving, that we experience the life we thought we would find in pursuing selfish ends.