

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 5, 2001

“Your Money or Your Life”

Luke 12: 13-21

“Your money or your life!”

If someone thrust a gun in your ribs and gave you that choice,
what would you do?

Most of us would turn over our wallets.

The threat works because we value our lives more than we value our money.

Or do we?¹

Do we really value our lives more than our money?

This is the question posed by a national bestseller that came out a few years ago
entitled *Your Money or Your Life*.

The book apparently hit a nerve with a large segment of the American public
with its promise to “transform your relationship with money”
and to help you “achieve financial independence.”

That is a nice thought, isn't it? Financial independence.

For most Americans, that really would be a new relationship with money.

No worries about how to finance anything.

No credit cards with whopping interest rates.

No auto loan. No mortgage. No worries about college tuition for the kids.

A solid investment portfolio to keep you in luxurious living well into the future.

We don't need to be Michael Vick, the Virginia Tech quarterback
recruited by the Atlanta Falcons at the age of 21,

being paid 63 million to warm the bench for the first year.

Most of us just want a future with no worries about money.

Some of you here today have actually achieved “financial independence”.

You've reached the age of retirement, or close to it, and found that
your hard work and diligent saving has paid off.

Or perhaps you've received a nice inheritance, and you've invested wisely.

You know you'll be able to support yourself comfortably for years to come.

For others financial independence seems an unreachable dream,
a mirage in the desert.

Just as you think you're drawing closer, that beautiful oasis
fades away to reveal the same hot sand you've been
plodding through for years.

The promised American dream is always a few more miles,
and a few more dollars, away.

So I suspect that when we hear Jesus tell the story of the rich man

building larger barns to store his abundant produce,
we each hear it a little differently.
Some may be able to relate to the man
who has more than he knows what to do with.
Others can only imagine.

But before any of us decide that this parable doesn't apply, listen again.
Jesus isn't just telling this story to rich folk,
but to the whole crowd that's following him,
probably many of them poor.
In fact, the man who comes to him here has been left out of the family will.
The story is not just for the rich.
And my guess is that most of us here today
would fall into one of two categories:
Either you are an American consumer who has achieved
financial independence,
Or you are an American consumer who is working very, very hard to achieve
financial independence.
You've either built your barns already and stored your ample goods,
or you're hoping with all you're worth that you will build them one day,
when you will be able at last to relax and be satisfied in your soul.
In other words, Jesus' parable speaks to everyone who uses money to live.
Jesus may not have written a bestseller on financial planning,
but he was definitely in the business of transforming
people's relationship with money.

So this man comes to Jesus, and he's been left out of the family will.
He want Jesus to bring him justice. He wants his share of the family money
and thereby to turn his future into a life of ease.
So Jesus tells him this story about a rich man
who, because his land produces so abundantly,
decides to pull down his old barns and build new ones
to store all his grain and his goods.
Thinking about his future and his prosperity, he says
*I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years;
relax, eat, drink, and be merry."*

Now, tell me, what has this man done wrong?
He is apparently a good farmer and a business man.
He no doubt worked hard to earn what he has.
Shouldn't he be entitled to a little relaxation and enjoyment?
How is his prudent preparation for the future any different from our own?
In some respects, not very different. Not very different at all.
But this man's sins are many.

First, it is interesting that, until this man is interrupted by the voice of God,
the only two characters in this parable are
the man and his money.

His grains and his goods and his barns for storing it all
have become the sole pursuit of his life.

No one else is in the picture.

Until God speaks, and says, “*You fool*

This very night your life is being demanded of you.

And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

Of course, the man probably has a plan for that.

His fortunes will go to his children,

to help them relax, eat, drink, and be merry.

And with their inheritance he will pass on the same foolish untruth.

And believing that untruth is the second of this man’s sins:

to believe that there is security in being self-sufficient.

This man is independent. He doesn’t need a soul in the world to help him.

He doesn’t need the support of his community,

or his friends, or his family, or even God.

He’s a self-made man, or so he believes,

until God speaks.

When God comes into the picture, things look different to this man –
especially his money.

He has shown himself to be quite skillful at hoarding his wealth,

but gravely lacking in generosity.

It seems that the thought of how he might use his wealth for the less fortunate
never entered his mind.

Even with all that he possessed, he never felt a sense of responsibility
for those around him in need.

But when God’s light breaks in and shines on this man’s life,

his true poverty is revealed.

He failed to see that his neighbor’s material needs were his spiritual needs² -

that he was in fact living a spiritually impoverished existence

in the midst of material abundance.

So it is, says Jesus, with those who store up treasures for themselves

but are not rich toward God.

Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;

for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

I cannot imagine any news that we in America need to hear

more than this good news:

One’s life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.

That is so contrary to what we are taught to believe by our culture.

Yet, that is what Christ offers:

Abundant life that has nothing to do with how much you own.

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Back in our college days,
Mary Ellen spent one of her spring breaks in the Dominican Republic
working on a project with Habitat for Humnaity.
She had an experience that is actually quite common when
middle class people visit poor countries.
She and her group were working in the coastal village of Enriquio.
This was not a resort town, but a poor village, like most of the villages
in the Dominican Republic.
The is why they had gone to Enriquio:
to help build houses for the poor villagers there.

One evening on the trip, they were invited to dinner at the house of a villager
This man and his family welcomed this group of 15 Americans into their home,
and served them a meal.
And the family served chicken with this meal,
which may not have been all that impressive to the Americans at first,
until they learned that for a resident of a poor village
in the Dominican Republic, to serve chicken to 15 guests,
would cost about 2 weeks wages.

Now maybe that doesn't sound very smart.
If you make a habit of spending that much of your earnings on chicken
to serve guests in your house,
you're never going to be able to save very much money.
You're not headed toward financial independence.
This man obviously needed a lesson in financial planning.

Or perhaps we could take a lesson from him.
Perhaps he knew something about abundance that we need to know.
Perhaps he has listened more carefully to Jesus teaching about money
than we have.
It may even be possible that he is living a life of greater richness than we
in all our prosperity
could ever hope to buy.

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Jesus calls us away from the unending pursuit of more.
Just a little more money, a little more stuff, a few more hours of work,
a few more years to be happy, to have what we need to be satisfied
at last.

Jesus offers a way to leave all that behind,
to say enough to the never-ending race for financial security,
and instead to find our security in God;
to say enough to unbridled accumulation,
and to find our happiness in being generous
and in showing compassion for those who need

some of what we have;
to say enough to the myth of self-sufficiency
and to live instead a life of genuine trust in God.

Jesus has come to show us just how rich we already are
as children of God.

God has forgiven our sin. God has blotted out our iniquity.
When the pursuit of abundance and wealth lures us away
so that we sacrifice ourselves to the gods of the marketplace,
God does not give us up, or hand us over,
or unleash the divine wrath against us.

Instead, God's heart recoils,
God's compassion grows warm and tender,
and God calls us home, to the place of true security,
in the household of God.

This is what Jesus offers us:
A life free from worry about the future,
not because we have a lot of money,
but because we are rich toward God
and because we trust in God's steadfast love and abiding faithfulness,
which is the only source of abundant life.

It's your money or your life. Jesus is offering you your life.

¹ Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, *Your Money or Your Life*, Penguin Books, 1991, p.1.

² Rabbi Israel Salanter, *New York Review*, 3/21/96, cited in *The Living Pulpit*, July-Sept. 1991, p. 32.