

Keep your lamp burning: generous under stress
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So, we've been talking about being ready for the sacrifices and challenges of following Jesus. Jesus has warned us that as the message of his glorious kingdom advances more and more into this present age, there will be growing opposition and hostility to those who want to walk that path and spread that message. So, we're going to be tempted when that opposition comes. One temptation is to be hypocritical; to pretend. To say one thing in one setting and another thing in a different setting to avoid the pressure. We might also be tempted recant; just deny our faith. Walk away from it all. Lord, spare us from both of these temptations!

Jesus demands faithfulness; God requires loyalty and allegiance. It's not that he doesn't sympathize with our troubles or our weaknesses. He does. That's why he's telling us now about these temptations and troubles. He wants to help us get ready. And, like we talked about last week, God will supply everything we need. He's so good.

The next temptation Jesus warns us about is basically hoarding. That makes sense, right? When the opposition comes it's easy to see that meager times might be ahead of us. If you remember from last week, we talked about how Rome issued certificates to its residence after they worshiped the pagan gods of Rome. Why do you think you needed those certificates? Why did you need to prove your allegiance to the gods of Rome? That's how you could avoid legal trouble; it granted you the ability to buy and sell. Imagine: every year when you submit your taxes the government asks you for proof that you subscribe to certain beliefs and that you renounce and abhor other (religious/Christian) beliefs. And when you do, they send you your new, annual, certificate (a card) that you have to use when you purchase goods at the store or propane for your house. Without it, you can't do commerce. Does that seem far fetched to you? Isn't that what Revelation warns us about?

So, what might be considered a natural, even wise, thing to do? Well, to hoard. To store up. To try and accumulate as much as you possibly can so that you won't be without the necessities of life. But Jesus warns against living that way for some very important reasons. He warns against the deeper heart issue of greed, which leads to hoarding. I bet every single one of us can feel this rub; we can feel the tension. Storing more and more seems like the perfectly logical step to take. But what if it's not? Let's read this next portion of Luke 12 and see what it says (READ Luke 12:13-21).

While this passage starts with somewhat of an interruption by this discouraged brother, the author uses this situation as an opportunity to help guard us against all the temptations that come with following Jesus. As you see from the story, a man wants his brother to divide up the inheritance. That means he's probably the younger brother; in that culture, the larger portion of a man's inheritance would go to his first born. The other children would get less (or maybe none at all). And little brother isn't so happy about that. The more things change, the more they stay

the same. The stories of family feuds over an inheritance are ubiquitous. One of the saddest things in the world to me is followers of Jesus fighting about mom and dad's estate. It is so unlike the character of Christ. Hey, moms and dads, those of you in the last third of your lives and you're starting to do some of your own estate planning, plan with the kingdom of God in mind. Tell your kids, "This is God's money; those are God's possessions. We will only pass on an inheritance to you if you're going to use it to live for the kingdom; we will only pass on possessions to you if we believe your character is formed in Christ so that the money is an instrument of blessing and not a curse." The scriptures are clear: large sums of money and possessions threatens people's faith, it can draw them away from Jesus. So often we think that leaving a large inheritance will be a blessing to our kids. Friends, if you're thinking biblically you might just conclude that leaving a large inheritance to your kids is the exact opposite. It might just be a curse. Why would you want the last gift you give to your kids on this earth to be poison for their souls in the form of a large inheritance? Think long and hard about what your kids need before you start meeting with your lawyers. And for those of you, for those of us, who still have parents with estates, guard your heart against all manners of covetousness. I'd rather let my brother and sister have all of my parents money than fight them for it hurting my relationship with them, dishonoring my mom and dad, and (worst of all) defiling my soul with the love of money and possessions.

The key verse, which serves as a foundation for the encouragement I just gave you and so much more that I will give you, is vs 15, which says, "Take care (be warned!), and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Let's break this verse down.

Take care and be on your guard - That's not just one warning; that's two in the same breath! Friends, Jesus, your blessed Savior and Lord, the one who died for your sins, is telling you to be doubly careful about something; he's urging you to be on your guard. Do you think he's just throwing those words around? I would suggest to you that Jesus is trying to save your life through teaching. So, what he's going to say is of utmost importance.

Against all covetousness - Here's Jesus main concern; here's what we are supposed to be on guard against. So, let's make sure we really understand it. What is covetousness? We're first introduced to covetousness in the ten commandments; in fact, it's the 10th one. It reads (Ex. 20:17), "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's." Throughout the OT the word used here for covet is also translated as "desire." Eve desired knowledge so she ate the fruit; Proverbs says wisdom is to be desired above all things... that's the same word. So coveting is desiring and there's a kind of desiring that is sinful and dangerous. And God says here in Ex. 20 that desiring, coveting your neighbor's stuff is forbidden; it's what Jesus says I should be on guard for.

Why is this a bad thing? Why is it bad that I would desire to have what my neighbor has? Isn't a little covetousness even a good thing? The Jones down the street have a new car;

maybe I'll go work even that much harder because I want a better one. Doesn't covetousness motivate me to aspire for more? That's where the last phrase in our key verse helps us out. It says, "*for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*" A Brian-approved paraphrase goes like this: life isn't found in more (or other people's) stuff or vacations or talents. Where is life found, FBC? Or should I say who is life found in? God! Life is found in God. At its heart, coveting is desiring something as if it will bring life. In the NT coveting is described as idolatry, meaning, coveting is the pursuit of ultimate and true life in things other than God. And in this case, it's in things that don't belong to you; it's in things that God says, "Those things aren't for you, they are for your neighbor. Don't you trust that I will give you the good things you need?"

So, let me give you a summary of this key verse: We've got to be careful about thinking life is found anywhere other than God. If we do forget that, especially when times are tough, we're going to covet and desire stuff that doesn't belong to us. And, of course, that ugly coveting and desiring can turn into ugly actions that are hurtful to others, dishonoring to God, and damning for us.

Let's get back to the text. Jesus then illustrates his point with a story, a parable. Notice an important adjective in the opening line of the parable (vs. 16), "The land of a rich man produced plentifully." Did you get that? He's already rich; he already has plenty. He already has more than he needs (that's how I think the Bible wants us to think of riches - more than you need). And this rich man became richer and thought, "Boy, what should I do now?"

We know from the story that he built bigger barns to store more crops, but I think we get a clue about his motivation in vs. 19 where he says to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry!" If I could interpret what he saying, I think it's, "I've made it! I've finally got enough to secure the life that I want." The man is an example of what Jesus is warning us against; he's a man who has tried and thinks he has found life in the abundance of things.

I think we are so susceptible to this. You've played the game of (PIC) LIFE, right? We have this game; if I was a little more discerning or careful I probably shouldn't let my boys play it. The whole premise of this game is to accumulate as much as you can; that's how you win the game. Acquiring more and more is the prism you look at everything. How many kids do you want? Well, as many as possible because you can collect money for them. When you flip the career cards over you groan with disappointment when you get the noble jobs of tradesman or educator because it's not the highest salaried careers. You have one goal in the game of LIFE and that's to get as much stuff as possible. But we buy the premise of the game, don't we? How many people play the game of LIFE and think, "You know, this game is detached from reality; who lives and thinks this way?" No, many of us do! There's is an undercurrent of this desire, this belief, that that's where you actually find life - in the abundance of things. But it's not true.

Now, consider this message in light of the theme of our sermon series, keep your lamp burning. One of the temptations you will feel as you walk with Jesus and as you start experiencing the opposition that comes when you bear Jesus' name is to accumulate more. To store more. To save more. To hoard as much as possible. But Jesus is saying in this passage that, no, a proper response to even this trial is to trust God and to be rich in good works instead. Even during difficult times, times of opposition, it's never God's will that you store more and more. So, let's look at the practical side of this.

First, let's talk about the saving piece. Isn't saving a good thing? Doesn't the Bible say we should save, even anticipate seasons of lack and save accordingly? Yes, I think that it does. So, how do we rightly save as the Bible commends, but to not succumb to the temptation towards covetousness? I think a big step forward in understanding this is thinking through your motivation. Why are you saving as much as you are? Why do you want to save more? Is it to maintain a kind of comfortable living you don't want to give up when times are tough? Are you saving to maintain a level of insulation from the hardships of others so that you can live at ease? Do you see what I'm getting at? Do you hear those keywords - ease and comfort. Are those goals we should be pursuing? Should we make those things our aim, especially at the expense of living generously to others in their times of need? Randy Alcorn has some really wise words concerning this issue and he talks about a kind of saving that effectively eliminates an ongoing trust in God. It reminds me a little bit as to why King Agur prays in Prov. 30 that God not give him more than he needs because if he has more than he needs he might very well forget about God.

Much of this is about your heart, it's about your motivation and your desire. God doesn't give us a percentage we should save like a financial adviser might. Instead, God sets us on a path and says, "Save for seasons of lack; be wise about what you might need when things are hard to come by. Even ants know to save a little. But don't hoard. Don't accumulate and accumulate like I'm not a good provider or as if life is found by stockpiling possessions. Life is found in me."

I do think God gives us a way to test ourselves in this. Do you catch his last statement in vs. 21? "So is the one who lays up treasures for himself (he means, being a fool) and *is not rich toward God.*" There's a clue in that verse. Are you rich towards God when it comes to your money and possessions? What is that? What's rich toward God mean? Think about the parable again; the rich man with his increasing possessions, stored more and more for himself. What could he have done instead of storing up treasures for himself? He could have passed them on. He could have blessed others. He could have secured the daily bread of the hurting and disadvantaged around him rather than secure his future comfort and luxury.

We've already learned from the scriptures that God makes us rich (in whatever - money, talents, time) so that we can use those riches to enrich the lives of others; not to enrich ourselves more and more. But what we are seeing in this passage that this is God's plan even under stress and oppression. God doesn't suspend or alter his plan in times of trouble. He still

wants us to be generous; he still wants us to consider the needs of others. He still wants us to give to others in proportion to what he has given and entrusted to us. What needs to change is what we do with our resources; what needs to change is a deepening trust and faith in God as provider. That at all times, and especially during times of difficulty, God will supply all our needs.

Money and possessions are important to us; they are important to God. But they are a unique temptation, too. Do some examination today or this week; as yourself, "Am I being rich towards God or am I tempted to gather more and more for myself? What will I do when the pressure increases, turn in and look up?" Friends, God will not disappoint you.

Key verse: Luke 12:15

Questions for the week

- How much can you relate to the message this morning? How come?
- What big idea is God stressing to you today from this message?
- From what you heard today, what can you do to guard yourself against all manners of covetousness? What are practical ways you can do that?