

Productivity and Presence: A Modern Parable Luke 12:13-21

The house across the street from us has had 3 different owners in the last 3 years. And it is a great house. As in, it isn't haunted or anything. Let me explain: For years it was Jeff Pierce's house. Then Jeff got married and spent less and less time in Hickory. So, when Judy and Bob, his parents wanted to downsize, they moved in.

After that, the Wright's, Courtney, Jared and their daughter moved in. And last year, a couple, the Bonelli's moved in. I wasn't sure they really existed because for 6 months I never saw anyone come in or out of the house. Since then, I only have ever seen Mr. Bonelli, and only, once. But then this spring a sign went up in the yard and now the Bonelli's have moved out and we are hopeful a nice family will be moving in.

And there is a reason why I am telling you all this. When the Jeff Pierce owned the house, he worked on it, little by little. But when Judy and Bob were going to move in, they did a lot of renovations to the house. Now, the house is gorgeous. The kitchen is updated, the bathrooms look great and the back deck is what dreams are made of. The Wright's who bought it from the Pierce's, only lived there about 9 months and then had to move to Caldwell Country for their jobs.

Then the Bonelli's bought it and have only lived there a year. The point I'm making is that since the Pierce's made their improvements, no other owners have made improvements or renovations to the house. After only living there a year, (again) making no improvements to the house, the Bonelli's put it on the market **for \$30,000 more** than what they paid for it. And the sale was pending the day the sign went up in the yard.

This made me a green-eyed neighbor. I complained to Tripp that I couldn't believe the Bonelli's were getting away with that asking price! They hadn't done a thing to warrant that kind of upcharge! A \$30,000 profit? Is the market really that hot? Should *we sell our house*, we'd made improvements – surely, we'd make money too! I was easily blinded by the dollar signs that I saw just across the street. The truth is I don't really want to sell our house. I, we, love our house.

Our household list of projects and renovations is not lengthy, but much of it is costly. When it comes to houses, or cars, or life dreams, it is easy to get caught up in focusing on the dollar signs. Money occupies a lot of space in our lives, whether we like it or not. Whether you are saving or spending, nestling dollars here for that trip or stashing dollars there for a new porch.

Did you know that the Bible has 500 verses on prayer, 200 on faith and 2000 on money?¹ I asked the Google. Money must be in there a lot because it has been a real concern for quite some time. It seems money is the one thing you can never have enough of. I think biblically identified, an exaggerated lust for money and the things it can buy is called, *greed*. I'll mention Steven Furtik because he, like me, is a pastor—at Elevation Church in Charlotte. However, not like me, Furtik's house near Waxhaw, NC is 16,000 sq. ft. Now I am not trying to point fingers at the Furtik's, but 16,000 sq. ft. is a heck of lot of house. *I mean you're going to need a lot of things to go in that square footage.*

And honestly, I don't know what I would do if I made the kind of money that he makes - who knows, I might build a big ole house too. And a pool. And that's what is so sticky about money. I admire people who seemed unconcerned with money. People who aren't into stuff - that isn't me. I'm into all kinds of things; truthfully most of us have something(s). We live in a world where money is a necessity and production reigns supreme; what you can produce often determines your worth and value. *Production equals profit, profit equals possessions and possessions equal success and livelihood.* Maybe this is what we could call *new math* - but then again, it's really *old math*, isn't? People have always dealt with wanting more stuff - greed.

We also work more than we used to. I have a love/hate those articles that float around about the possibility of the US moving to a 4-days work week. That sounds amazing, but it won't happen here. We are a nation that values productivity over people. And as Christians, who are called, to look at the world differently; as followers of Christ.

¹ <https://blogs.baylor.edu/truettpulpit/2016/07/18/luke-1213-21-2/>

I wish there was a story that could talk to us about that kind of greed, the one that lusts after productivity, which produces profit, which produces possessions... I wish Jesus had a parable about this; something we could go off of.... *(Read Luke 12:13-21)*

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he 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."

As Whit has said before, our tendency is to take a passage like this personally as if I might stand up here and demand we all examine our 401k's and pensions with a biblical-fine-toothed-comb. That I might ask, what treasure we are storing up... Our tendency is to feel guilty about our savings accounts and retirement plans. This story makes us feel guilty: for the money we have saved and for the provisions we have stored up for the future. This story makes us feel guilty because saving and preparing might mean we haven't trusted God enough to provide for us.

Another cause for our guilt is we've heard this story before and so we read it backwards - even the title of the story in most bibles is, the Parable of the Rich fool or the warning against greed - and so we read greed into everything without the story speak for itself.

First there is a greedy man who wants his brother's inheritance. He is chastised by Jesus for wanting something that was rightfully his older brother's and so Jesus tells a parable about a man who loves his stuff -- clearly just like this man in the crowd. Moral of the story, don't want things. Because that means you are storing up treasures for yourself and shortchanging God. But Deuteronomy 21:17 mandates that the oldest son receive a double portion [of the inheritance].² So who exactly is the greedy one?

We are good at biblical gymnastics. We have to force a logical jump from an inheritance dispute to Jesus' warning about all types of greed to a parable about storing up our wealth and then we let what God says to the man become what God says to us: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." Ahhh, religious guilt, how do we function without you?

I read another pastor's sermon online on this passage who said this, (referring to the man in the parable) "He was a fool because this man made plenty of provision for retirement but he made no provision for eternity."³ Hmm. I'm really not seeing that though, not even a little. Nowhere in this passage does it mention eternity or heaven or anything like it.

We hear Matthew's Jesus issue a warning about storing up treasures in heaven and read that into Luke's version here. But that isn't what Luke; there's no mention of heaven or eternity at all. What we are told is, "the land of a rich man produced abundantly." Notice Luke doesn't say, his land produced *excessively*. The story is crafted to say, the man has something different than *excess* - he has *abundance*. *Excess* usually has a negative connotation doesn't it? It implies something that isn't needed. Abundance somehow is more positive; it too implies having more than is needed, but there's an element of generosity in abundance.

² The Jewish Annotated New Testament, Sec. Ed. NRSV Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, Eds. (Oxford University Press, NY 2017) notes on Luke 12:13

³<https://blogs.baylor.edu/truettulpit/2016/07/18/luke-1213-21-2/>

So, if we already know the financial state of this man - he was rich – he had more than he needed, *excess* - it's as if Luke wants him to do the right thing by saying he now has an *abundance*.

What did Alan and Judy Harrell do last summer, when their garden produced more tomatoes than they needed? Was it excess? Yes. But the Harrell's brought them to Wednesday Night Supper and shared them with us. It was more than excess, it was an abundance.

What this man does is asks himself what he should do with his abundance -what should he do with all this productivity from the land? He takes stock of what he has, realizes that the barns, silos, and granaries he has are not adequate, so he builds bigger ones. So, the rich man, with more than he could possible need or use, produces bigger storehouses for himself. Does this describe the American mentality or what?

At no point does it occur to this man to share his abundance. Instead of using his abundance for the people around him -his family, his neighbors, his community, the poor in his land ...instead of *using that abundance for others* he hoards it. His focus is on productivity, which determines worth and value.

The Jewish faith has a term, *tikkun olam* - and I just love it. *Tikkun olam* is the repair of the world. It is the human participation in the repairing of what is wrong. For Jews, *tikkun olam* falls in the category of a commandment, involving work for the improvement of society.⁴ It is not a term that promises heavenly blessings or stars in your crown - rather it is the command of God to participate in making the world better right now. And to participate, to embrace *tikkun olam*, involves an awareness of the world around you; an awareness of your own community; an awareness of your neighbors. It is all about a heart and mind of **presence**.

The man in our parable is not present. He is thinking only of himself; he is thinking only of his future, only thinking of his abundance and his ease of life as he stores up his own possessions.

⁴ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tikkun-olam-repairing-the-world/>

Beware of all kinds of greed, Jesus warns, for life does not exist in one's possessions. Life is not about we can produce, life is not about production. Jesus warns us against that kind of math: production equals profit, profit equals possessions and possessions equal success and livelihood.

I don't think this is a parable about the money in your savings account. I don't think it is about heavenly treasures, whatever those might be; and I don't think it is about eternity, whatever that looks like. (but I hope there is a pool)

I think the parable is about presence over production. About seeing our each other in all our forms of need (*spiritual, emotional, financial, material, did I mention spiritual?*) and out of **our abundance**, not excess, but out of our **abundance** being present enough with each other, to respond like Jesus would have.

Christ says over and over, the kingdom of God is at hand; the kingdom of God is near - in other words, **God's kingdom is about presence**. When God calls the man a fool, isn't because the man hasn't prepared for eternity; he is called a fool, because he hasn't participated in *tikkun olam*, he has not participated in repairing the world, here and now!

Annie Dillard wrote, "How we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives..."⁵ and oh doesn't that ring true? I'm pretty sure Jesus told her to say that because it is the essence of his parable; it is the essence of his warning on greed. *How we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives* - presence over productivity. Are we present enough to see that our brother needs help, and some of us, most of us here, have received a double portion? If our days are spent hoarding our excess or if our days are spent on the pursuit of endless productivity, what kind of lives do we have? Production, plus profit plus possessions? What does that add up to? God's kingdom, in other words God's love, grace and mercy have never been about exact math, at least not that I can tell. Presence is all about adding up our days - helping to repair the world, out our abundance, so that all of us have the richest of lives.

⁵ Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (Harper Perennial 2013)