

# **What's In Your Wallet?**

**10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**Luke 12:13-21, Eccles. 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23**

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Community of Joy Lutheran Church

Hot Springs Village, Arkansas

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I. I would imagine that most all of us have seen these commercials. They feature some guys who look like they are Vikings, but they are in the present day.

A. They do some weird (and sometimes likely funny) stuff, and they are able to “charge” their stuff on their very useful and flexible charge card. They always end the commercial by asking, “What’s in your wallet?” They want us to think that their card - the Capital One card - is fantastic. It will get you all of “the stuff” you want with very little hassle. They want us all to think that we really need this card - it’s the best! That commercial is all about “getting more stuff!” That is our goal - is it not? The one with the most stuff wins. In this time in our society - we have gone far beyond “keeping up with the Joneses!” We could care less about “the Joneses” now - we just continue to want more stuff for us. We can’t seem to ever get enough stuff! We treasure our stuff. Some think it gives us self-worth. It seems to be a wonderful source of satisfaction for many people. When we invite others to our homes

- certainly it is for fellowship and (often) an enjoyable meal - but it also becomes a time when we can show you our stuff (we saw yours last week - now we want to show you ours).

B. Oftentimes I think we see this kind of consumerism - where possessions reign supreme - as a 20<sup>th</sup> or a 21<sup>st</sup> century “invention.” Well, surprise, surprise - my friends. We have two Biblical stories today that show that this type of “possession-oriented life” is not new. The story from Ecclesiastes for today probably took place about 950 years before Christ came to the earth (circa 950 B.C.E.). And, the story that Jesus told would be about 2,000 years old now. So, “possessionism” has been around for a long, long time!

C. Now, you may not have thought about it, but the first lesson from Ecclesiastes 1 and 2 and the story from Luke 12 have many similarities. Let me deal with the Ecclesiastes text first. This text may be the second-most familiar text from that book. Most people first recognize the text from Ecclesiastes 3: “a time for everything - a time to be born, a time to die, etc.” The text for today is also somewhat well-known. It starts: “Vanity of vanities,... all is vanity” (Eccles. 1:1). I wish that our bulletin would have had a different version of that text printed, because I think many of us misunderstand the word “vanity” as it is being used in this context. My New International Version of the Bible says it this way, “Meaningless! Meaningless! ... Everything is utterly meaningless.” I think we often hear the word “vanity” and link it to the word “vain.” We think that someone involved in vanity is someone who is very

vain; someone very conceited. Well, that is one of the meanings of “vain,” but the one that is used in this case (from Eccles. 1) is this: not yielding the desired outcome; fruitless; meaningless. So this ancient Ecclesiastes text is speaking about much (all) of our life being meaningless!

D. Let’s discuss that a little. Have any of you read Ecclesiastes recently (or ever)? I was pretty much jolted this past week when I read (parts of) that book in conjunction with this message. A lot of it has to do with a somewhat stunned human realizing that much (most) of what he has done will be for naught. The realization comes that when he dies - all of the stuff doesn’t matter anymore. My NIV Study Bible says this about the Book of Ecclesiastes. The author may have been Solomon, but much suggests that it was not a monarch that wrote this, but whoever did write the book was well-off and had many things. The purpose of the book has to do with reflecting back on a long life and taking stock of the world as he had experienced it. The writer discovers that human wisdom - even that of a godly person - has its limits - and that much of what we humans claim to be important - is not. The author finds humankind in pursuit of one thing and then another - laboring as if he could master the world, and therefore master his own destiny. He sees man vainly pursuing hopes and expectations that in reality are “meaningless” - like “chasing the wind” as the book proclaims.

E. The second lesson for today also deals (to a certain extent) with this same subject. Verse 2a of Colossians 3 says,

“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,…” Jesus, some 950 years after Solomon, finds himself dealing with the same “vain” (meaningless) stuff. A man’s desire for personal wealth prompts Jesus to teach about the foolishness of living a life pointed in the wrong direction. This man seemed compelled to collect possessions that he hoped would provide him with happiness, security, and peace. This man - different from most who approached Jesus - brings a complaint against his brother to Jesus. It seems that he sees Jesus as a good, fair, honest, and trustworthy teacher. He hopes (I think) that Jesus will side with him and then his brother will have to give him some of the inheritance. Unfortunately for him - in the time of Jesus most often all of the holdings of one’s father went to the oldest son. This “other son” seems to be something like the “prodigal son” - he wants his money so he can go off and have a life of his own. Jesus’ response (to the sadness of this man) is a refusal to get involved, but he takes the opportunity to tell the people a story about greed - where the main character displays an enormous amount of foolishness.

F. We know the story - don’t we? The man was doing very well; wonderful crop season. He ran out of room in his storage barns. He had what we (in our society) would normally call “a good problem.” His harvest (and previous harvests) was so good that he needed to build bigger barns to hold all that he had. Wow! Some might say. Isn’t that the kind of thing we strive for? Don’t we want to be so successful that we need to expand our

business? Don't we want to make so much money that we "need help" carrying it all to the bank? I think that is pretty much true - and because of that we are probably all in that "fool" category as well. Timothy V. Olson wrote a sermon entitled: "Priceless" about this text. He said this regarding this man who needed bigger barns. "This guy could be in one of the MasterCard ads. It would go like this: 'Seeds for a good crop - 3,000 denarii (or something like that); storage for a bumper crop - a bunch more denarii; being able to eat, drink, and be merry - priceless!'" (Thanks to Tim for that insight). This whole story smacks of us and the fact that many of us have lived and continue to live in this same way. We put the focus of our lives on the wrong thing/s.

G. Jesus says it this way at the end of the gospel reading for today, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21). There is that all-important name - God! We've talked a lot about stuff, but not so much about a solid, loving, faith-filled relationship with God. That needs to be the basis of our lives. If the foolish man from the story Jesus told had his focus on God - he might have had different thoughts when his crops exceeded his barn-space. How about this for an option: when the barns are full we'll give the excess to the poor. Was that ever a thought of his? Is that ever (or often enough) a thought of ours? Paul said it well in that text from Colossians, "Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth." Those "things above" are divine things - like God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy

Spirit. Those “things above” are things like love, selflessness, justice for all, caring and sharing with humankind, and even loving our enemies!

H. We all need to realize that death robs us of everything except the life we find in God and Christ. We live in a world that knows (at some level) that we cannot buy happiness, health, or love, (maybe we can “rent” those things for awhile), yet we act as if we can indeed secure those things somehow. Our Lord God offers us the one and only way to transcend death. So, in the end, it really doesn’t matter “What’s in your wallet?” or “How much stuff do you have in your storage unit?” What matters is “What’s in your heart? Who’s in your heart? How do we carry out our relationships with God and our fellow humans?” As someone said - years ago - it’s not about who you are, but about whose you are (and we are God’s)! So, I will borrow one more line from Tim Olson (slightly modified). May we all strive to live our lives in a way that robs death of the power to have the last word. Now, that is truly priceless! Amen.