

WHAT COMES FIRST?

Series: Last, Lasting, Everlasting: Stories of Jesus on the Way to Jerusalem

Colossians 3: 1-11, Luke 12: 13-21

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Let's pretend and imagine for a minute. Pretend that Jesus, in the flesh, is going to come through Damascus and you have a ticket to be able to see him and to talk with him. You are going to have a moment to be with and speak with the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Now imagine. What will you say to him? What will you ask him? What is your most burning question? Hold onto your answer. I will come back to it in a moment.

One day Jesus was surrounded by a crowd. Luke tells us that the crowd numbered in the thousands, and it was so tightly packed that they were trampling one another. Jesus was offering some very intense teaching. "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy." "Do not fear those who kill the body, and after can do nothing more. Fear him who, after he has killed has authority to cast into hell." "Whoever acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God." You see what I mean by intense? This is life and death teaching. This is that time to decide whose side you are on – God's side or the side of darkness.

That's the scene. Thousands crowded together, and Jesus saying that things are about to get rough; you have to decide if you are in or out. Then, someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." What? Really? What did that have to do with anything going on? That would be like my standing here giving a full-out hellfire and damnation sermon, with flushed face and waving arms, saying that judgment day is upon us and you better repent and beg for mercy or risk eternal damnation and, when I take a breath, someone saying, "Uh, pastor David, I'm not excited about the next menu at the Wonderful Wednesday dinner. Can you get the kitchen team to change it?"

The man's request was out of the blue. But beyond that, if you had a chance to ask the Christ a question or to make a request, is that what you would ask? I challenged you to imagine the question you would ask. Did anyone imagine that question? He was face to face with the Lord of life and that is what he came up with.

It was a little startling to Jesus based on his initial response. He answered, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" This was a polite way of saying that presiding over small claims court ain't in my job description, buddy. Jesus then used it as a teaching moment. "Take care," he said, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." He followed this with

the parable in the Gospel lesson today. Basically, a man applied all of his time, energy and focus on building bigger and bigger barns to store his crops. On the very day he finally decided he had enough, he died. All that he stored would now do him no good, plus there was now no time to work on his relationship with God. Jesus concluded, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

To understand this parable, it is helpful to pay attention to what set it up. As we have seen, Jesus was teaching about matters of eternal life and death. The man asked about a financial dispute. Jesus was trying to get people to see the urgency of the eternal. The man was trying to get some money from his brother. You are worrying about the wrong thing, Jesus was saying.

You see, in this setting, it doesn't matter whether the questioner had a legitimate beef or not. Maybe his brother was the executor of the estate and was unfairly keeping everything for himself. Maybe his brother was the oldest and, as was often the case, inherited everything, and the younger brother didn't like it and wanted him to share. Maybe it was something else. I don't know. I know it is not surprising. I have seen families broken apart after the reading of a will as sisters and brothers viciously fight over who should get what. It happens more than you may know. It's sad. I, for one, am planning on blessing my children by spending everything so there will be nothing for them to fight over. I am sure they will thank me.

All kidding aside, who knows what the fight was about? But whatever it was about, it was irrelevant. It was bad enough that the man was willing to be at war with his brother over money. It was worse that an inheritance was his primary concern. He was with Jesus! He should have been hanging onto every word Jesus was speaking. He should have been asking what he needed to be doing to inherit eternal life. He should have been saying please forgive me of my sin and let me be with you in your kingdom. Instead, he wanted Jesus to tell his brother to give him his money so he could go home. You can hear Jesus asking in the parable, and what if you get your money but not a relationship with God? Contrary to secular teaching, the one with the most toys doesn't win. The one rich toward God wins.

Christ reinforces this following the parable by saying don't worry about these things. Instead, strive for God's kingdom. The rest will fall into place. Paul says the same thing in his letter to the Colossians. "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above... Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

This parable, then, is really about priorities. In the parable, we do not know what motivated the man. Maybe he was motivated by greed, or by fear of want, or by ego, wanting bigger and better barns than others, or just a desire to have a comfortable retirement and an inheritance for his children. We don't know. Whatever the motivation,

though, his priority in life was possessing more and more. Putting bigger barns first meant putting God last. If Jesus expanded the parable, he might have even said the man was planning on getting around to God, but the response would be the same - too bad. Too late.

What comes first? I know plenty of people who make plenty of money. I don't see a problem with that. I also know people who make making plenty of money their sole priority in life. That is a problem. That means the guiding question in all things is not what would God have me do, but what can I do to make more? I'm not even talking about what we do with the money we make. That is another whole conversation. I am talking about priority. I remember a conversation with a man who put intense pressure on his daughter to not pursue the ministry, ultimately talking her out of it. The young woman felt called to serve the church, and she was gifted in many ways to do so. Her father did not care. His reasoning was that she would never make any money. I told him that she would make enough to eat and have a roof over her head and have clothes to wear, and her needs met. More importantly, I told him, think of all the souls she might save. He looked at me like I was from outer space. She would make far more working in his company than in the ministry. End of story.

That sounds extreme, but how many have not pursued their interest, connected with their giftedness, or followed the path God set before them, because another path would lead to bigger barns? I marvel when I listen to star athletes explaining why they have to leave a team and city and situation they love. It is often because another team is offering them one hundred million instead of ninety million. They have to go, they say, because they have to feed their families. Oh please! That is offensive. Lots of people are working two or three jobs and still, literally, cannot feed their families, so don't tell me that making millions playing a game somehow leaves you at risk. Mostly, though, it is sad. If you really love where you are and what you are doing and truly financially have all you could ever possibly need, why would you leave for more? There may be other good reasons to move on, but why leave for more? Priorities are mixed up there.

Of course, the parable is put in the context of possessions. We can easily extend it to other things, such as time. I get how responsibilities claim our time and how there never seems to be enough time in a day to get done what needs to get done. I listen to people talk about their schedules and it makes my head spin, and often my schedule makes my head spin.

But those spinning times may be the very times we need to ask ourselves a hard question. If we do not have time to worship or to pray, if we do not have time to be with our spouses, our children, our friends, if we do not have time to get the rest needed for a healthy life, what are we doing that is more important? We say that we have to do this or that, and sometimes that is true. Sometimes, though, we only think that we have to

or maybe we want to and, consciously or unconsciously, we put those things before God, family, friends, even self. What comes first?

A man in the crowd put getting a piece of an inheritance ahead of eternal life with Jesus. The man in the parable put having more possessions ahead of eternal life with God. It is so easy, so easy to get so caught up in making a life that we give up having a life.

Lent is a good season for meditating and reflecting on your priorities. What is most important? Is the money you make and the money you give connected to that? Is the time you have and the time you give connected to that? Are the gifts and graces you have and the gifts and graces you give connected to that? Are you focused more on meeting your needs or gaining your life? Do you strive for the kingdom, trusting that the rest will fall into place?

What did you imagine that you would ask of Jesus if you had a chance to be face to face? If you imagined that you would ask Jesus to help you get a share of an inheritance, I hope that you understand that that is not the best answer. It is a sign that your priorities are out of order.

Don't worry about those things, Jesus tells us. Put God first. Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. The rest shall be added unto you. These were some of the last words of Jesus. They are lasting words that lead to everlasting life.

Amen.