



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURCHASE OF HAPPINESS

Scriptures: Luke 12:16-21

Matthew 13:45-46

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January 16, 2005

SCRIPTURE

Our reading actually could start a couple verses earlier. Jesus is teaching. A huge crowd (1000's) is gathered around. A guy hollers out: *"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."* [v. 13]

Rabbis in that day and age were often put in this position—of rendering a judgment on some matter of concern. Jesus responds by putting his finger on a larger issue—namely, our attitude toward the accumulation of wealth. He wants to make the point that our relationship with God is more important than our relationship to material goods.

Isn't that often how God works in our lives? We bring a problem to God in prayer. . . He shows us something that needs to change in our thinking, attitude, behavior, or approach. He has a way of putting his finger on our hearts!

Well, Jesus (in v. 15) warns the man to be on guard against all kinds of greed (which is desire for what we don't have). That is in direct contradiction to what our culture urges us to do [*more on this later*].

We come to the parable now, **The Parable of the Rich Fool** [vv. 16-21]:

¹⁶*And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. ¹⁷He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'*

¹⁸*"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."'*

²⁰*"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'*

²¹*"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."*

Interestingly, Jesus goes on to talk about *worry* in the next several verses (vv. 22-26). He says:

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. . . Life is more than all this. . . Look at the ravens—how God feeds and takes care of them. Aren't you worth much more? . . . Worry will not add—it will only take away from your life. . . So quit worrying about all these things you think you need (and they're pretty basic things—like food & water). . . Your Father in Heaven knows what you have need of." He goes so far as to say: "Go and sell all your possessions and give to the poor."

It is hard for us to hear these words in a world defined by buying & selling, having & owning.

The Rich Man in Jesus' story dies before he could begin using what he'd stored in his "bigger barns". He had spent all his time preparing for life before death. . . none on preparing for life after death. That's why Jesus says (to the man in the crowd. . . and to all who would hear):

"Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out. . . a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys." [v. 33]

THE PROBLEM

I want to speak to you today about ADDICTION – not to SUBSTANCES, but to THINGS.

Our attachment to the things of this earth must be appalling to the God of Creation who has given us such an incredible world to live in. . .and created us for a whole different set of purposes (e.g.: WORSHIP – FELLOWSHIP – DISCIPLESHIP – MINISTRY – MISSION). Remember those [from *The 40 Days of Purpose*]?

Plus our attachment to the things of this world is a constant source of worry, frustration and anxiety.

But we are in the grip of it, aren't we?

- “*We are the object of a heated pursuit: advertisers on Madison Avenue and business people on Main Street are doing their darnedest to shape us into a loyal and lavish buying public.*” They are “*the want makers*” (title of a book).
 - The goal of advertising is no longer *information*, but *persuasion*.
 - Everyday in the U.S., businesses shell out \$200 million (\$1 for every person in the country).
 - America's “consumers in training” (our children) see 20,000 TV commercials a year.
 - Over the course of an average lifetime, we will spend 2 years watching and/or listening to commercials.
- Shopping has become a national pastime. [Malls & stores have to be open on Sunday now.]
- *Shopaholism* is an official psychological malady.

Consumerism affects the way we think and our attitudes. It shapes the way we live. . .

1. *Consumerism breeds selfishness & hedonism* (which is pleasure for pleasure's sake, and usually leads to self-indulgence). In the 1st American century, greed was held in check by the stronger Biblical value of giving more thought to our *neighbor* than *ourselves*. But over time, the urge to spend and indulge has taken over. Now it's **life-liberty-and the purchase of happiness**.

2. *Consumerism claims that appearances matter most*. You are what you wear. The kind of car I drive gives me substance. The label on my sport coat proves I have (or don't have) class. Externals matter in our culture; what's on the inside doesn't.

I caught the bug when I was just a little kid. There's a story my mother loves to tell. . .

When I was just 6 years old, I was watching TV over at my grandparents' house one day. I saw a commercial for a stretch exerciser—just a long piece of rubber that you could exercise with to build muscles. I wanted to have muscles like the guy on TV, so somehow I called in and ordered one. A few days later, a deliveryman appeared at our door. When my mother answered, he said: “I have a package for S. Bringardner.” [Keep in mind I was just 6, and of course had not even thought of how I would pay for such a thing. I just wanted those muscles!]

3. *Consumerism promises contentment*. “Boredom, anguish, grief, emptiness, and anxiety can all be relieved by whipping out a Visa Gold. My worth as a person, my sense of well-being, my meaning in life, my personal health, my personality all can be bought.”

ILLUSTRATION I call this *the Roadrunner syndrome*:

Wile E. Coyote, the obsessive critter in the *Roadrunner* cartoons, is forever sending away for some new device from Acme to help him catch the Roadrunner. But the coyote never manages to snag his nemesis. Instead, he ends up again & again in a cloud of dust on the canyon floor, his tail scorched from his Acme Pursuit Rocket Thruster.

Today's consumer culture influences us in ways other than just how we spend our money. Consumer attitudes have crept into every area of life. We no longer shop only for blow-dryers, bomber jackets, and bobby pins. Now we shop for doctors, a new look, a good school district, even a marriage partner—using such guiding principles as. . .

- Mixing and Matching: We don't necessarily stick with one brand or one store
- Bargain Hunting: We try to get as much as we can by paying as little as we can
- Comparison Shopping: We look around for the best deal
- Checking for the Best Fit: It's got to be “me”

➤ Checking the Return Policy: If it doesn't fit or work, or I get tired of it, I take it back.

At this point there is a dialogue between Pastor Steve and a “voice” from behind the congregation. The text follows. . .

Phil

Excuse me, Pastor Steve, do you mind if I turn off the power point screen. . .because I have to go on-line and do a little research. See, I'm shopping for a church, and those guidelines you just pointed out have inspired me to get started.

Steve

These guidelines? You plan to *mix and match*?

Phil

Sure, it makes good sense.

Steve

Maybe for your wardrobe, but we're talking about your faith.

Phil

Well, a person's faith is really an extension of their personality, don't you think? That's the whole point of mixing and matching, to come up with something that is totally you. Take my neighbors for example; they attend a Christian church on Sundays so their children will get the basics. But they also practice transcendental meditation every day and consult with a dream analyst once a month. Oh! And they have a totem pole in their front yard to ward off evil spirits. My kids think its way cool.

Steve

And which thing do they believe?

Phil

All of it! See, that's just it – they tailor made their own belief system to suit themselves. And as a result, everyone thinks they are so unique. We all want to enhance our individuality, don't we?

Steve

And how did they arrive at this combination? Would you say they did some “*comparison shopping*”?

Phil

That's exactly what they did! And they ended up mixing a little Zen, a little New Age, and a little Native American spirituality along with your basic Christianity. It fits their needs.

Steve

So, they're not inclined to go with “*one size fits all*”?

Phil

Well, who is? A person's faith should define who they are.

Steve

Now, I can agree with that, but what is the problem with straight Christianity? Isn't it defining enough?

Phil

Maybe for some people, but there are a whole lot of interesting belief systems out there, and it's really hard to settle on just one. It would be like wearing only one color.

Steve

The thing is, we're talking about faith now. . .not consumer goods. Jesus came for the benefit of all humankind. So, metaphorically speaking, that really is “*one size fits all*”. [BREAK]

But you said you were shopping for a church – may I point out that you are in a church right now?

Phil

I know. I'm scoping it out.

Steve

Looking for a *bargain*?

Phil

Isn't everyone? You know, this is a good opportunity to ask some important questions. If I joined this church would you require me to tithe?

Steve

This church has no requirements. Tithing is between you and God.

Phil

Okay, here's the situation – I don't want a lot of return for my membership. I just want to sit in church, listen to the music, and hear a good message to start out my week. That's all I want. I don't want to be involved in any committees or anything like that. And I don't expect any special treatment, unless of course, I get sick or have real problems. So I think 10% of my income is a little out of proportion to what I would be getting in return. Let's face it, I could just go to Barnes and Noble's and buy some religious books, and gospel music CDs, and settle in with them on Sunday mornings for a lot less!

Steve

My friend, there are a lot of ways to give to a church. We have lots of members here who give generously of their time and talents, and the benefit they receive from giving is priceless. And, in return, they receive a measure of fulfillment and satisfaction. Isn't that a bargain?

Phil

Hm-m-m-m...if I give a lot to the church, would that put me in good standing with God, so He would give me an easier life?

Steve

Noooo!

Phil

Then I'm not seeing a bargain here.

Steve

Well, maybe you need to look a little harder. Christianity is the ultimate bargain: you give Jesus your limited life, and he gives you an eternal one.

Phil

Okay, I'm thinking a consumer mentality is not the best way to choose a church after all. And, of course, you don't have a *return policy*.

Steve

Actually, we do.

Phil

What! You do? How does it work?

Steve

Once you come and hear the Word of God, we expect you to return!

Back to the Sermon Manuscript. . .

Well, you see how consumerism has influenced us in our search for ultimate reality. . .spiritual truth. . .and relationship with God.

GOD'S WORD TO A DISCONTENTED WORLD

Are we really shoppers when it comes to making religious or spiritual decisions? It seems from reading Scripture, that our choice is not between competing brands of religion, but between submitting to God or denying Him. . .between taking God at His word or rejecting Him.

If it seems like the decision comes down to opting for a personal favorite, we may have missed it. It's more about choosing between a way that is God's way and another that isn't. It's not a matter of "this one fits me better than that one."

And although there are benefits from following Christ—multiple benefits!—this is not American Express. Having our needs met is a fraction of what Christianity is all about. But following Christ is about putting God first; it's all about Him, not me [recall *The 40 Days of Purpose*]. When we get the order right, you can't believe how different life is.

Following Christ is God's intention for us. Not like a grocer friend of mine who was going through a crisis. . .tried Christ for 30 days. . .then put Him back on the shelf, saying "*It didn't work; it's not for me.*"

The church must avoid feeding into a consumer mentality in the way it preaches Christ and does ministry. It is a claim; it is far more than a self-help technique. The Christian message is about a King who laid down His life for us, then called us to lay down our lives for Him.

Maybe in just about every other area we are *consumers*. But when it comes to this area, we are *creatures* standing before their Creator—as broken, messed-up sinners in need of a gracious restorer. . .as people on whom He already has a prior claim.

Here's the big difference I want you to get this morning:

*"A consumer stands **over**, with the freedom to pick and choose, mix and match, return or exchange at will. But a follower of Christ stands **under**, having relinquished the freedom to pick and choose. He or she is submitted, committed, under the sway of Another. The disciple is no longer a buyer but a person bought at a price. . .the price of Jesus' blood."*

ANALOGY

You know how it feels when you buy something new (e.g.: a CD, a pair of hiking boots, or a new car)? You know the burst of energy. . .the excitement. . .how it wakes you up. . .makes you feel alive? Then after awhile, that feeling fades. The "new thing" doesn't feel new anymore. It kinda blends in with everything else you own. You don't feel the same charge. In fact, that old feeling of restlessness and discontent returns.

What's going on here?

Something *inside* of us yearns for something *outside* of us that will calm that restlessness and give us peace, satisfaction, and fulfillment. **Blaise Pascal** (16th century) gave us a line that really explains what is going on here. He wrote: "*There is a God-shaped vacuum in every heart that only God can fill.*"

That fits with something Jesus said. It's a simple word picture found in **Matthew 13:45-46**: "*The Kingdom of God is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*"

Jesus is the fulfillment of our every longing. That nagging discontentment that propels us to the mall or whatever we turn to deal with the unsettled itchiness for *something*—Jesus says, "*I'm the 'fine pearl'. . .I'm what your heart is longing for. But the cost is everything. . .everything you have.*"

Does that mean I have to relinquish my 401K? Cash out my investments and donate the proceeds to the poor? Trade in my car for an old junker? I don't know. It depends on what has a hold on you!

- If your possessions have you (rather than the other way around), then yes, get rid of them.
- Whatever blunts your capacity to worship, enjoy and serve God, get it out of your life.

Turn yourself, your heart over to Jesus. When you do, you will also be giving Him your wallet, your calendar, your mortgage, all your titles & deeds, all your certificates of deposit, everything that means anything at all to you—people included—so that these things will not be more important to you than He is.

Do that, and you will suddenly find you have everything you have ever longed for. . .everything you have been looking for.

That's how God wants us to live—in a world that constantly pressures us to buy-buy-buy. . .a world in which we are so easily *lost*, not *found*, in a sea of purchases. He wants us to be **in right relationship with Him AND the “things” of this life**. Believe me, that is worth everything!!!