

Jesus, Money and Anxiety

Luke 12:22-34

Last week we saw Jesus respond to a man in the crowd being eaten up by greed and covetousness. Now, on the surface, his issue seemed much more respectable than that: he just wanted his brother to share the inheritance with him; he just wanted what was rightfully his. But Jesus saw this guy's heart issue for what it was. And He proceeded to tell the parable of the rich farmer who thought life was about getting more and accumulating wealth and possessions and enjoying it for himself. Jesus' point was, don't make the same foolish mistake, don't be a fool like him, rather lay up treasure in heaven.

And by any estimation, Jesus talks about money and wealth a lot. We think of money and faith as being like oil and water: they just don't mix, and we try and keep them separate and compartmentalize things. But Jesus is far wiser than that. He understands the human heart better than to do that. He knows the hold and draw that money and possessions can have upon us, so he keeps returning to this issue.

But as some of you may have experienced this week, as Jesus challenges our approach to wealth and stuff, and you begin to see the implications of that, it can leave you feeling anxious, and all these questions begin to bubble up: If I'm going to start giving my money away, and looking out for the poor, who's going to look out for me and the kids? If I start providing for the kingdom, who will provide for us? And what happens when a rainy day comes? What will I have to fall back on then?

Well, Jesus anticipates just such reactions and his response is: don't be anxious.

Don't be anxious

Jesus immediately follows up the parable of the rich fool with v22: 'Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life.'

Now, what we worry about tells us a lot about what we really value, doesn't it? If you worry about how a presentation is going to go at work, it might be because what others think of you matters to you, or you fear the consequences of a bad performance on your career prospects. If you worry about clinching a business deal, that may be because you care about your prestige within the firm or that you want to be able to provide for your wife and kids. If I worry about my girls, and how they turn out, it might be because I love them, and want the best for them, or because I worry what you will think of me if they turn out bad. What we worry about says something about where we find our security and our identity and when this thing gets challenged or undermined, we worry.

So when Jesus challenges us not to lay up treasure on earth but to be rich toward God, and give away our riches, and that challenges where we put our security or get our sense of power or self-worth or identity from, then we will get these anxious thoughts and questions: 'but what if...?'. And Jesus says, 'don't be anxious.'

But telling someone who's worrying that they just need to relax and be happy, is useless unless there's something to back it up. Just telling someone not to fear an

approaching army intent on destroying you is no help at all, unless you know that right behind you is an army of far greater firepower. So why does Jesus say we can dethrone money in our hearts, and not lay up treasure for ourselves but instead be rich toward God, and be generous to the needy and not be anxious? What's the firepower behind that?

Jesus gives three reasons:

That is not what life is about.

V22-23: 'Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.' Jesus is saying, the reason you don't need to worry about money or seeking your pleasure or security in accumulating wealth is that isn't what life is about.

It's as if I were to take a friend to watch a rugby match, but all my friend was interested in was the ice-cream vendor. The whole point of going to the match was to watch what was going on, on the field, but he's got his eyes glued on the queue for the ice-creams: 'o no, she's gone for a Straciacelli! And look the vendor's passed him the cone, but he's dropped it!'

And I'd be stood there thinking – I think you're missing the point. That's not what we're here for, this is the match, this great big thing in front of you. And when we worry about clothes and food and stuff and this is what consumes us and has our attention, Jesus says, 'you're missing the point of life'. You don't need to worry about those things, that's not the point. In 1 Tim 6:17-19 Paul says to Timothy, his young protégé pastor, 'As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, *so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.*' To spend our time worrying about money and getting more stuff, is to take hold of that which isn't the real deal. And Jesus is saying, your focus is wrong, you can stop worrying about that stuff.

The second reason you don't need to be anxious is:

Your Father knows and cares about your needs:

V24: 'Consider the ravens...' v27: 'Consider the lilies...' Just take a look around you, Jesus says, and see how God feeds the birds and clothes the flowers of the field, and you are of more value than birds and flowers. Don't you think he will care for you? And a couple of weeks ago we saw how Jesus used the example of the sparrows, and how God knows everyone of them. But whilst sparrows are nice and fluffy, and everyone loves the sparrows, ravens were unclean birds. But God even cares for them, Jesus says. And if he provides food for the birds, do you really think he will let you starve? And if he makes the flowers beautiful, don't you think he will beautify you with true beauty?

You see, at the heart of so much of anxiety about life is the feeling that we are at the mercy of events. And money and possessions can become an idol in our lives when we put our trust in them to shield us from events. We feel safe if we have

money in the bank. And Jesus is saying, no, you can know true security because your Father loves you. And knowing that, frees you from the fear of letting go of your money.

Anxiety and worry are blind and deaf to God's care. That's why Jesus says in v28: 'O you of little faith.' But when we hear His promises, and believe them, and trust Him and take Him at His word, anxiety and holding on, falls away. That's why David could say in Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.' When you know that God is your shepherd, you know he will never leave you or forsake you, and you will not want. And that is true whether he leads you in green pastures and beside still waters, or through the valley of the shadow of death.

It is faith, trusting in his grace to us, that frees us from looking to money and holding onto money.

The third reason Jesus gives for not being anxious is simply:

Worry doesn't work:

v25-26: 'And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest.' Anxiety just doesn't work Jesus says. It doesn't do what you hope it will do. You're worried because you're concerned about your life, but worry doesn't make that life any better.

Now, if you know anything about the history of medicine you'll know that there are a whole load of treatments that at one time people thought effective but now we know were useless at best and positively harmful at worst. And Jesus says, yup, that's anxiety. It's useless, it doesn't do what you want it to do, in fact it does the opposite. You think it's going to cure you, but in fact it kills you.

So not only should you not worry because it misses the point about what really matters; not only do you not need to worry because your Father knows your needs and you can trust Him; you also don't need to be anxious because anxiety can never do what you want it to.

And in v29: when Jesus says, 'And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, *nor be worried*' the verb he uses for worried is an odd one. It's the only time it's used in the Bible and it means to be up in the air about something. Worry is like dangling on the end of a rope, and your feet can't reach the ground, and you're hovering between hope on the one hand and despair on the other. And Jesus is saying, instead of being anxious and up in the air, and looking to money and wealth for your identity or security, you need to ground your feet firmly in me.

So, don't be anxious but do, Jesus says, be different.

Be different

V30: 'For all the nations of the world seek after these things.' Everyone else lives like that. People all over the world give their life to this stuff, and the pursuit of

more for selfish ends, but being my disciple, Jesus says, means you're going to see things differently. They think this is all there is, you know differently. They think this will give them what they seek, you know it's only your Father who can give you true peace and security. So, don't live like everyone else.

Now, we've got to be clear here that Jesus is not calling us to some kind of ascetic life, living in a cave, half-naked and drinking nothing but camel pee. When He says, don't seek after what you are to eat and what you are to drink and what you are to wear, He's not suggesting, either, you stay at home and play games on the Wii until Jesus comes again. The Bible is really clear on the need to grow up and get a job: 'work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one' (1 Thess 4:11-12); 'If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat...we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work but busybodies. Now such people we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.' (2 Thess 3:10-12). And as I said last week, Jesus' criticism is not against wealth creation, he is the original wealth creator.

But if we're not to live like the nations live, chasing after this stuff, how *are* we to live? If getting more for ourselves isn't to be our priority, what is? And Jesus' answer is: the kingdom. V31: 'Instead, seek His kingdom and these things will be added to you.'

God, and His rule and reign in our lives is to be the focus of our lives. It's about looking to God not to stuff. To seek His kingdom means to have His rule extending over every part of our lives, including work and money. And as we do that, we cease to be a slave to the desire for more, or the fear of what if I let go of it, instead we trust Him and His sovereign rule. And Jesus' promise is, as you do that, everything else will find its right place. 'All these things will be added to you.' Your Father knows that you need them, He knows what are necessities. Jesus isn't saying, hey forget about clothes, just go naked. He's saying, you can trust your heavenly Father: He knows what is good for your souls, and as you put Him and His kingdom first, He will take care of the rest.

But what will 'seeking His kingdom' look like when it comes to our finances? The answer is: joyful generosity, because giving runs in the family.

Giving runs in the family

v32: 'Fear not little flock.' When we look to money for our security or identity or our pleasure, there are all these reasons to fear if we have to let go of it, but when we make God and his kingdom our focus and our treasure, there is no reason to fear, because, Jesus says, 'it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'. The very thing Jesus says we are to seek, our Father is more than ready to give. The thing above all things that we need, He gives as His gracious gift to us. And it is God's giving of Himself to us that lies at the very heart of the gospel.

2 Cor 8:9 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become

rich.' Jesus was rich, beyond all splendour; we were poor, standing penniless, poverty stricken in our sin before him, but He out of His grace, became poor, became a man, died on a cross, that we might become rich, that we might be forgiven, that all the treasures of heaven might be ours. And there was nothing we could do to earn it or buy it, it's his free gift to us. It is indeed the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom.

And it's as we understand that, and grasp the fact that God is a giving God who has given to us who were poor that we will find ourselves able, as Jesus says in v33, to sell our possessions and give to the needy.' It is the gospel that breaks the hold of 'holding-on' and frees us to give. Finding our security in God and his giving to us, frees us to be generous to others. We can give because God, our heavenly Father is a giver. It runs in the family.

Later on in Luke 19, Luke tells us the story of Zacchaeus, the arch-tax collector, who encounters Jesus and His grace, and in response gives away half of everything he owns to the poor and pays back fourfold anything he had defrauded. And when Jesus saw that kind of response he said, (Luke 19:9) 'Today salvation has come to this house.' The proof for Jesus that the gospel was having its effect on Zacchaeus, was he was ready to give. Money was losing its hold. Salvation didn't come in response to his giving, Zacchaeus started giving in response to salvation. When you understand God's grace, you've got to give.

And the joy of giving, Jesus says, is you're the one who gets rich. V33: 'sell your possessions and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.' Provide yourselves with money bags, Jesus says. Why? Why do you need a moneybag if you're giving it away? Because you are going to receive treasure. As you give away treasure that won't last, in return you are going to receive treasure that does last.

You see, the problem with earthly treasure is, it lets you down. And you can't take it with you. It's not that it's bad, per se, it just doesn't last. Prov 23:5 hits it on the button when it says that earthly wealth sprouts wings. You think you've got it and then it just flies away. Or you die. Either it flies away or you fly away. And that is why the rich man in last week's parable was a fool. He invested in a fund that was always going to fail.

Just imagine if you took all your savings and cashed in everything you own, and gave it all to a fund manager to invest in the hope he would make you rich and he invested it in the last remaining manufacturer of square wheels, who was just about to go out of business, and as a result you lost all your savings. Wouldn't you ask him, 'what were you thinking? Why on earth did you put my money there? Couldn't you see it was going to fail?'

And wise people put their treasure where they cannot lose it, and Jesus says that is by investing in the kingdom. You grow rich, with riches that will last, by giving away earthly riches that will never last. Keep it, and you're buying shares in square wheels; give it away, and you get real treasure for all eternity.

You see, one way or another we will part with our money. One way or another we will say goodbye to it. The only question is, when? At death or before? If we part with it before, we get to send it on ahead and transform it into eternal wealth. Keep it and it's food for moths and land-fill sites.

And understanding that you get treasure in response to your giving is the reason why you can give with joy. Jesus describes the person who finds the kingdom as being like a man who stumbles on treasure in a field *and in his joy*, Jesus says, goes and sells everything to buy that field. How come he can sell everything he possesses with joy? Because he knows he gets to exchange it for something even more valuable. He gets the field with the treasure in it. And that's why, in Paul's words in 2 Cor 9, we can be joyful givers, the kind of giver God loves, because we know that when we give, we get real treasure, eternal treasure in return.

And Jesus finishes this up by reminding us that (as someone has said) heart and treasure go together. V34: 'For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' Everything you have is God's. And he's given it to you to steward. As Randy Alcorn says, you are God's money manager. And your heart will always be where you put **his** money. The apostle Paul could say in Philippians 1 that for him death was gain. Why? Because Christ was his treasure. That was where he had invested his life. Let me ask you, will death be gain or loss for you? Will you be saying goodbye to treasure when you die, handing it over to the moths and land-fill sites, or being welcomed by your treasure? By God's grace, we still have time to transfer our wealth to the fund that never fails.