

A lot of junk: Luke 12:13-21

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

Here in the rural upper Midwest, it seems every other person has a pole barn. Usually it's full of old tires, old brakes, a trailer, dozens of tools gathering rust, coffee cans loaded with lug nuts and screws. But then almost nobody in America lives like the desert monks.

Ed and Edna's place is pretty typical, I think. Her cupboards, bureaus, cabinets, garage, attic and spare bedroom have been crammed full of things that define her. ("Oh, you know Edna Furbelow," says her neighbor, "she collected Hummels.") Every once in a while, Edna took some of the clutter out to the front yard and sold it, although no one stepping inside her house ever knew the difference. Now that Edna has died and her husband's pole barn has finally gotten emptied, everything must go.

It's too bad she's not here for the lesson, because there's something morally instructive about an estate sale. Absent the owners, the items lose their meaning, so that even Ed and Edna's kids and closest friends think, *My God, there's a lot of stuff here. What a lot of junk!* The agent, who doesn't want to haul it away, has priced everything low: books go for 50 cents, a big set of plates for a few bucks. Here is an old rusty bicycle from the Eisenhower era and a once-prized lamp that now seems hideous. Set out on the green grass outside the barn, Ed's band saw and drill press, his pride and joy, appear headed for retirement.

Now the auctioneer calls out Lot 152, a collection of four hundred Hummels. Eyes roll and knowing smiles break out, but no one bids. The auctioneer looks at the estate agent, the agent looks at Edna's oldest daughter: a lifetime's hobby and a person's identity have come to this. It's almost possible to hear Jesus asking, *And these Hummels, whose will they be?*

Which brings us to Jesus' story about the man who stored up grain for many seasons in his barns, with such a surplus that he thought of building bigger barns. The word is never used, but it would have been plain to Jesus' audience that this man had ignored the tithe. He had left no grain for the gleaners, the widows and the orphans,

and the only tithe he had offered was a sigh of contentment.

As usual, we are a little too ready to assume that Jesus is speaking of someone else. The scribes and Pharisees? Those must be other people—conservatives, surely. The “rich young ruler”? This man with so much laid up in his barn? Surely not us.

But Jesus *is* speaking to us, to the widow with her mite no less than the rich; perhaps most of all to us of the middle class. Our modest homes contain hundreds of stewardship lessons. We have overlearned or misapplied Joseph’s counsel to lay up stores in fat years for lean years. Much of our money is tied up in tomorrow—pensions, IRAs—while our neighbors need help today. And we tithe less and less: less than 2 percent. During the recent recession, charitable giving fell through the floor. Here in Newaygo County, one of the poorest in Michigan, unemployment stands at 9 percent, and the relief agencies need all the help they can get, yet many of our driveways boast RVs, snowmobiles and hobby cars.

Just a few years ago, some rural Christians expected a catastrophe, the coming of the Antichrist, and on the advice of their pastors stocked their Y2K shelters with rice and beans, portable generators and ammunition. Never mind that this fear was totally at odds with the gospel, which promises that God looks after the sparrows and the lilies of the field no less than his own children. Never mind that hoarding food supplies and guarding these supplies with guns was totally at odds with the gospel. If that time was notable for anything, it was that Christians themselves had become anti-Christians.

So Jesus is speaking to us of the middle class. But this story is not just about what we do personally; it has implications for what we do together.

For our country is a very rich man. The United Nations has asked the wealthiest countries to give at least seven-tenths of a percent of their GNP to foreign aid. Among them, America’s giving ranks dead last: it gives one-tenth of 1 percent. (Of course, we do provide enormous military aid.) Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Sweden lead the world in generosity. In 2001, with a population of 5.3 million, less than that of greater Chicago, the Netherlands gave \$3.2 billion, almost a third of what we gave. We Americans debate what constitutes a tithe, how much is subject to it, if it is regressive and should be modified for people of modest means—say, for us. Meanwhile those godless Scandinavians seem to be practicing the tithe.

To be sure, there are needs close to home.

Not too far from Ed and Edna's place, two young parents are trying to make a go of it in a trailer on her folks' property. Family obligations and the threat of financial ruin hang over them constantly and strain their marriage. She was working at Wal-Mart until the second baby came along; now they have to hunt for the very lowest bargains. So they are here at the estate sale, picking through the tables, gleaning what they can.

"Everything must go," says the sign over the children's clothes. They date back to the 1970s, amazingly preserved in tissue by Edna for her grandchildren, never imagining whose hands would take them.

One-tenth of 1 percent? Two percent? Or 10? Everything belongs to God, so everything must go for a good cause. And if we have not been generous in our lifetimes, God will compel us to give those things away, for someday we must go, too.