

Treasure chest: Luke 12:32-40

by [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

In writing sermons I try to pay attention to transitions, and so I confess that I have a quarrel with the cutting and pasting of Gospel texts for the 10th and 11th Sundays after Pentecost. The bridge passage that connects them (Luke 12:22-31), which is excised, is both a valuable commentary on what has gone before—Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions—and a preparation for what is to come—Seek the kingdom and these things will be given to you. I suggest backing up a few verses before reading this week's Gospel lesson.

"Do not fear," Jesus teaches his disciples, "it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Their fears are rooted in anxiety about daily survival, in contrast to the promise of God's providence, recorded in the history of Israel (see Exod. 16). Jesus then commands the disciples to give generously to the poor.

Our lack of compassion toward the poor is not always the result of selfishness or stinginess. An inability to be generous may be connected to the chronic anxieties that float through our minds as we encounter these readings: we think about an orphanage in Haiti, an aging father's prescription drugs, the famine in sub-Saharan Africa, an adult daughter's search for a job, the lack of affordable housing, planning for retirement. For most of us, anxiety and faith are woven together. That Jesus spent time reflecting on this with his disciples is an indication that he was aware of our human condition: we want to be generous, and yet at times there are obstacles to our faithfulness.

Jesus then approaches the matter from a slightly different direction; he comments on the placement of our priorities. The investment of our time, our money, our energies: where is all of this leading us?

I had been meeting with a young couple in anticipation of their upcoming wedding. Along the way the groom had talked openly, at least three times, about their financial stresses and limitations. Their situation concerned me, and I began to think about declining an honorarium for performing the wedding.

Then in one of our last conversations the groom shared, in passing, that the couple were huge fans of our city's football team, the Panthers. "In fact," he noted, "we go to every one of their games, home and away." I quickly did the math in my head: travel, lodging, tickets, meals in places like Buffalo and Seattle, Chicago and San Diego.

"Where your treasure is," Jesus taught, "there your heart will be also."

My wife and I are contemplating having an empty nest in the very near future. Our two daughters have grown up, advancing from elementary school projects to middle school confusion to high school testing of boundaries. We have made it safely thus far, and our hope is that grace will lead us home.

Each year I pore over the taxes, looking for ways to be accurate and prudent, and searching for any advantage that will help us keep our heads above water. In the past years the checks and credit card withdrawals tell the story of our lives: viola lessons, volleyball camps, choir tours, prom dresses, mission trips. We are a pretty frugal family, and yet it all adds up.

At times our spending seems extravagant. When our older daughter approached her 16th birthday, we realized that the viola she played did not match her talents or her conductor's expectations. My wife investigated and found an excellent instrument. She never told me the exact cost, and I never asked. She did note that it cost more than the car I was driving at the time, which was a 20-year-old Volvo. When we gave the viola to our daughter at breakfast on her 16th birthday, however, the extravagance seemed irrelevant.

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There is an urgency about these matters. Time passes, and we are shaped by our commitments and loyalties, which add up to a particular way of life. We are accountable to God and to one another. At times our priorities are misplaced; in the language of Abba Poemen of the fifth century, we hear the warning: "Do not give your heart to that which cannot satisfy your heart." "Life is more than food," Jesus insists, "the body more than clothing" (12:23). As disciples we recognize the danger of the sin of storing up treasure for ourselves, of giving priority to that which seems, in hindsight, to be trivial.

The call is clear: be prepared, light the lantern, wake up, get ready. The audit is scheduled; the date and time are unknown to us, but the Son of Man is coming soon. Our security is finally not in the stock market, which goes up and down; or in the government, which rises and falls; or in the corporation, which splits and merges and restructures. Instead, we would do well to learn from the ravens—they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them (12:24). Their patterns of behavior teach us that life is a gift, a gift to be shared, a gift to be treasured.

Our true security lies in the grasp of a fundamental truth: the reign of God is near, closer than we realize. The culture, and our misplaced allegiance to it, has led us down the path of anxiety about the present and the future, about our possessions and wealth. The gospel as gift and demand is clear: God will provide for us, and through us God will provide for others.