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Luke 12:13-21
November 15, 2026

A Time to Keep and to Throw Away

Last week I shared about the reality TV show *Filthy Fortunes*. It follows a team of estate hunters who go into cluttered homes searching for hidden treasures. One person's trash really can be another person's treasure.

But while the it showcases the treasures, it doesn't say much about what happens to the rest. Spoiler alert…Dumpsters full go into the landfill!

Think about how much stuff we accumulate. The average American home contains over 300,000 items. A typical wardrobe contains more than 199 pieces of clothing.

Studies from UCLA found that the average middle-class family has 438 books, 139 toys, and 39 pairs of shoes.

Twenty-five percent of families with two-car garages cannot fit a single car in their garage because of all the stuff they own. And one in ten rents an offsite storage unit to hold the things we cannot fit in our homes. That's a $45 billion industry!

The truth is folks, we've got STUFF. Too much STUFF!

The Wisdom Teacher of Ecclesiastes reminds us, "There is a time to keep and a time to throw away." But what does that mean for us today? What should we hold on to, and what should we let go of?

To explore that question, we're going to look at another of Jesus' parables, this time the Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12.

Jesus was traveling through the countryside teaching large crowds that gathered around him. As he was teaching, a man approached him with a family grievance. He wanted Jesus to settle a dispute over his father's estate. And that's where we pick up the story today.

Please join me as we read from Luke 12:13–21.

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." **14** But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" **15** And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." **16** Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. **17** And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' **18** Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. **19** And I will

say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' **20** But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' **21** So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!"[1] That's how the Book of Ecclesiastes begins. Thirty-eight times the Teacher uses the word *meaningless*.

But *meaningless* isn't the best translation of the Hebrew word *hevel*. The word actually means smoke, vapor, breath, or mist. Something fleeting, insubstantial, and difficult to grasp. It is real, but it is here one moment and gone the next. It doesn't last very long, certainly not for eternity.

And that brings us to Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool. Here is a man who has placed far too much confidence in the permanence of his wealth.

We've already heard the setting of the story. Jesus is teaching a large crowd when someone approaches him with a request. He wants Jesus to settle a dispute over his father's estate. Apparently, his older brother, who would typically have received the larger portion of the inheritance, wasn't sharing it with him.

The man simply wants his fair share. Seems reasonable, right?

But notice Jesus' response: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Now the actual Greek can be translated, "Beware and keep yourselves from all covetousness. For life is not in the abundance of anyone of that which possesses him."

Did you catch the slight difference? It isn't simply about how much we possess. It's also about the things that possess us.

And that's an important distinction.

Jesus then tells a parable to help the crowd understand what he means.

There are two primary characters in this story: a rich man and God.

The rich man is a farmer who has worked his land and produced an exceptionally good harvest. At first glance, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with that. In fact, we might even consider him successful and a good steward.

But listen carefully to how he talks about his success .

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[1] Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

"He thought to himself. What shall I do? I have no place to store MY crops. This is what I WILL do. I WILL tear down MY barns and build bigger ones. There I WILL store all MY grain and MY goods. And I WILL say to MYSELF, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

Do you notice anything?

It's all about HIMSELF. His plans. His possessions. His future.

Now, at first hearing, we might even justify his actions with the words of the Wisdom Teacher in Ecclesiastes who said: "I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil - this is the gift of God."[2]

But Jesus comes along and says, "Not so fast!"

The problem isn't that this man has been successful or that he has accumulated wealth. The problem is that he has forgotten where his blessings came from and what he is supposed to do with them.

Not once does he ask God what he should do with the abundance he has received. He never considers the needs of others. He simply assumes that everything belongs to him and exists for his enjoyment.

He has forgotten that he is a steward of God's gifts. Ultimately, he hasn't created anything on his own.

And then there is God, who calls this man a FOOL.

The Greek word for FOOL is *aphron*. It describes someone who is unable or unwilling to recognize the consequences of their actions. Someone who refuses to acknowledge their dependence upon God.

Psalm 14 says, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"[3]

In other words, this man consults only himself. He has no room for God in his plans.

Because he has stored up his wealth for his own benefit, he has failed to use it for the purposes of God's kingdom. He could have fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, cared for orphans and widows, or helped those who were struggling.

Instead, he has accumulated more and more STUFF for himself.

And then God says: "This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

Hevel!

Everything he worked so hard to accumulate is temporary. He cannot take it with him.

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[2] Ecclesiastes 2:12-13

[3] Psalm 14:1

Jesus concludes: "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

So what does the wisdom of Ecclesiastes have to teach us about knowing what to keep and what to throw away? And what does it mean to be rich toward God?

What should we keep?

One of the first stories that comes to mind is the story of Joseph and his jealous brothers near the end of Genesis.[4]

Joseph was a dreamer and his father Jacob's favorite son. His brothers knew it, and they weren't particularly happy about it. So they devised a plan to throw Joseph into a pit and leave him for dead.

Long story short, Joseph is eventually sold into slavery in Egypt. Through a series of remarkable events, he rises to become second in command over all of Egypt. He interprets Pharaoh's dreams and leads the country in storing grain during seven years of abundance so that when famine strikes, there is enough food to feed Egypt and its neighbors.

Now, I'm certainly not suggesting that we throw our siblings into a pit! But Joseph's story reminds us that God can take even our difficult circumstances and use them for good purposes.

It also reminds us that there is wisdom in preparing for the future. Joseph understood that the abundance of one season could be used to meet the needs of another.

Proverbs 21 says: "In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish person devours all they have."[5]

And Proverbs 13: "Dishonest money dwindles away, but they who gather money little by little make it grow."[6]

Clearly, Scripture isn't telling us that saving or planning for the future is wrong. There is wisdom in being responsible with what God has entrusted to us.

But Jesus takes the conversation a step further. He reminds us that there are some things worth accumulating and others that will never last.

Jesus said: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and dust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your hearts will be also."[7]

So what should we keep?

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[4] Genesis 37-47

[5] Proverbs 21:20

[6] Proverbs 13:11

[7] Matthew 6:19-21

We should hold on to those things that have eternal value. The things that draw us closer to God, strengthen our relationships, and help us serve others. We invest in the treasures of heaven rather than becoming consumed with the treasures of earth.

But what should we throw away?

Scripture is equally clear that there are things we need to get rid of.

We are to cast off the sin that holds us back. The writer of Hebrews encourages: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."[8]

We are also called to throw away and destroy idols that take the place of God in our lives.

God commands us to have no other gods before Him nor make idols in the form of anything in heaven or on earth.[9] Deuteronomy tells us to burn the images of [pagan] gods and not bring them into our homes, lest we become ensnared by them.[10]

And we are encouraged to let go of the material things we are tempted to hoard. Why?

Because it's all *hevel*. Vapor. Mist. Breath. Here today and gone tomorrow.

So what are some of the things we tend to place our hope in?

Our comfort and ease. *Hevel.*

The money in our 401(k)s. *Hevel.*

The degrees behind our name. *Hevel.*

Our status, success, and careers. *Hevel.*

Our children's status, success, and careers. *Hevel.*

Our political ideologies and nationalisms. *Hevel.*

The keepsakes in our china cabinets. *Hevel.*

Our technology and entertainment. *Hevel.*

Our houses. *Hevel.*

The books in our libraries. Now, this one is particularly convicting for me. What am I going to do with all the books I've accumulated? I can't store them all in my home. My kids probably won't want them. I'd love to give them to a seminary in a third world country where others could use them.

But even those books are *hevel*.

The tools in our garages. *Hevel.*

The cars in our driveway. *Hevel.*

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[8] Hebrews 12:1

[9] Exodus 20:3-4

[10] Deuteronomy 7:25-26

The clothes on our backs. *Hevel.*

Even our churches can fall into this trap. Over time we accumulate religious items because they remind us of people, special seasons, or meaningful spiritual experiences. We become attached to things because of the memories associated with them. Before long, we have a whole collection of stuff we cannot bring ourselves to part with. And then our churches can begin to look more like spiritual museums than living communities of faith.

Folks, it's all *hevel*.

Here today. Gone tomorrow.

None of these things follows us into eternity. Most will eventually be thrown away, given away, or sold for a fraction of what we once thought they were worth.

Anyone who has ever had to settle the estate of a loved one knows exactly what I mean.

Now, I realize this may all sound a little depressing. But I don't think Jesus is asking us to feel guilty about everything we own. Nor is Ecclesiastes telling us that the things of this world have no value.

Rather, both are inviting us to consider where we place our trust and how we use what God has given us.

So how can we become rich toward God with all the STUFF we already have?

Let me suggest a few things.

First, remember that everything we have belongs to God. Our money, our homes, our talents, our abilities, and even the opportunities we have been given are gifts from God. We are not owners as much as we are stewards. Our responsibility is to use what God has entrusted to us for God's glory and the good of others.

Second, give to God first. Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all of these things [like food, clothes, a roof over our heads, daily needs], will be given you as well."[11]

Giving isn't about what we have left over after we've taken care of ourselves. It's about putting God first and trusting that God will provide what we need.

Third, be intentional and generous. Plan ahead. This is one of the reasons we've asked each of us to return a planned giving card as part of our stewardship campaign. If we don't make generosity a priority, it is easy to put it off. And remember, giving is not about equal gifts but equal sacrifice. God isn't concerned with how much someone else gives. God cares about the heart behind our giving. As Paul reminds us, "God loves a cheerful giver."[12]

And finally, hold loosely to the things of this world. Rather than waiting until we're gone to decide what happens to everything we've accumulated, why not

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[11] Matthew 6:33

[12] 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

begin sharing some of it now? What difference could our generosity make in the lives of our children, grandchildren, friends in need, our church, and the ministries we care about?

After all, we can't take any of it with us.

But there is something deeper here that I don't want us to miss.

Why do we accumulate so much stuff in the first place?

Sometimes it's because we enjoy having nice things. Sometimes it's because we worked hard for them. But sometimes I wonder if it's because we're trying to fill a void in our lives.

We buy things hoping they will make us happy. We accumulate wealth hoping it will make us secure. We hold on to possessions because they give us a sense of identity or accomplishment. We convince ourselves that if we just had a little more, a bigger house, a nicer car, a larger retirement account, a more prestigious job or one more thing, then we would finally be satisfied.

But the satisfaction never seems to last. There is always something else we want or something else we think we need.

Oil tycoon JD Rockefeller was once asked how much money was enough. His response, “Just a little bit more.”

And that's the problem with *hevel*. These things are temporary. They cannot give us the lasting security, peace, or fulfillment our hearts are searching for.

The Rich Fool in Jesus' parable thought his barns were the answer. He believed that if he could just store up enough, he could finally relax and enjoy life. But he had missed the most important thing. His barns were full, but his relationship with God was empty.

You see, the void in our lives cannot be filled with more stuff. It can only be filled by God.

And this is where Jesus comes into the picture.

Jesus doesn't promise us a bigger barn, a larger bank account, or a life free from uncertainty. Instead, he offers us something far greater. He offers us himself.

In Christ, we discover that our worth doesn't come from what we own, what we earn, or what we accomplish. Our security isn't found in the size of our retirement account or the possessions we've accumulated. Our identity is found in knowing that we are loved by God, forgiven through Christ, and welcomed into God's family.

Jesus is the treasure that does not fade away. He is the one who satisfies the deepest longings of our hearts. And through him, we receive an inheritance that moth and rust cannot destroy and that death itself cannot take away.

So perhaps the question isn't simply what we should keep and what we should throw away. Perhaps it's what we are holding on to that keeps us from holding more tightly to Jesus.

The Rich Fool spent his life accumulating things that he couldn't keep.

May we spend our lives investing in the one thing we can never lose.

May we thank our heavenly Father for every good gift that comes from his hand. May we be faithful stewards of those gifts, generous toward others, and willing to let go of the things that keep us from following Jesus.

And may we discover that the richest life isn't found in having more, but in knowing Christ, who gives us everything we truly need.

Amen.