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When Material Things Become a Spiritual Matter
Luke 12:13-34

Sometimes people get things confused, don't they?

I heard a story a while back about a man who had experienced a serious heart problem, and almost died.

Several weeks into his recovery, one of his longtime friends visits him at home to see how he's doing. He tells his friend, "Yeah, I'm really doing pretty well. I'm feeling better every day. I've been walking every day for the past couple of weeks because the doctor said I had to get some exercise. And I'm trying to follow this really strict diet he gave me."

So his friend says, "What kind of diet?"

He says, "Well, you know—a lot of fruits and vegetables, and he said I can only have *white meat*."

"Nothin' but white meat, huh?"

"Yeah, and you know, I really do love fatback, but I'm about to get tired of it!"

People do get things confused sometimes, don't they?

There was some confusion going on in this passage from Luke 12 that we're looking at this morning. One man was confused about the role of Jesus. The man in the parable Jesus tells was confused about how he should deal with his abundant possessions. And Jesus' disciples were confused about what should be their top priority, the most important thing in life to them.

In every case, what was at the heart of the confusion was *material things*.

Through the centuries, there's been a lot of confusion about material things, especially how they relate to spiritual matters.

In the Old Testament, many people came to believe that since God had said he would bless those who obeyed him and curse those who disobeyed, then if somebody had a lot of material possessions, he or she must be pleasing to God. Otherwise, why would they have all those blessings? The flipside of that was that if someone was poor or in need, then obviously this person had somehow displeased God and was under his curse. This was a misunderstanding of great magnitude!

There were some in the ancient world who believed that spirit was good and matter was evil, and therefore the two could never have anything to do with each other. Their influence among some early Christians led to a heresy called *Docetism*. They taught that the Son of God obviously had to be spiritual, and could never mingle with the material. So in their view, in Jesus God the Son did not *really* take on human flesh; he just *appeared* to be a man. That sort of does away with any significance of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, doesn't it?

There's a lot of confusion today among Christians about the relationship between material and spiritual things. You don't have to have the TV on a religious station very long before you're going to hear some preacher preaching or teaching that if you're pleasing God, you'll be blessed with good health and prosperity in this life. It's called "the health and wealth gospel" or "the prosperity gospel." And it's what many people want to hear. But try telling this to the martyrs, both ancient and contemporary. Try telling it to those in other parts of the world who are suffering for their faith today. Try telling it to that faithful saint who has served the Lord all her life, who had ordered her life after his ways and commands, and is now a widow on a fixed income and in declining health herself.

We live in a world that has both a material dimension and a spiritual dimension. Sometimes the veil that separates the two gets pulled back a little and we see things that we can't see with our physical eyes. It's not that those things aren't real. On the contrary, the things of the eternal realm are more real than anything in this material, physical realm! They're just different.

But is there ever a time when material things become a spiritual matter?

A rejected request and a pointed parable

Look at what happened in our passage from Luke.

As Jesus is teaching the crowds, he has been warning them to be on guard against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He has also called them to absolute faithfulness, trusting God even when it threatened their very physical survival.

In the midst of that, some man in the crowd speaks up and says, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me" (12:13).¹

You've seen it before, haven't you—a dispute in the family about the inheritance? According to custom in the ancient Jewish world, the oldest son was supposed to receive a double share of the inheritance. Apparently, there were two sons in this family, and the younger felt the older wasn't giving him his rightful share.

Now it wasn't unusual to appeal to a rabbi in cases like this. But Jesus refused to get involved, telling him, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then Jesus issued a warning against greed, with one of the most poignant statements ever made about material possessions: "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (12:15).

What did he mean by that? He tells a parable to illustrate what he was saying.

A certain rich man's crop was very abundant one year, to the point that he didn't have enough room to store it. He decided he would tear down his old barns and build new, bigger barns to hold his crops. He decided that this gave him all the security he needed, that he would be able to sit back, relax, and eat, drink, and be merry.

But he made one very serious error in his calculations. *He never took God into account.* So in the parable God says to the man, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (12:20).

Then Jesus says, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (12:21).

Does Jesus mean not to prepare for the future, not to save, not to be wise stewards? Of course not! What he means is that we must not depend on possessions, we're not to store things up for ourselves *without* being rich toward God.

The whole point is that possessions and the accumulation of wealth are *not* the most important thing in life! *That makes material things a spiritual matter.* If we put them in the place

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

of God, we're in deep spiritual trouble! It's fine to have material possessions. But we must submit them to God and use them as he would have us use them. And most of all, we must trust in God, not our possessions!

A call to simple trust and heavenly treasure

Jesus then turns to his disciples, and tells them not to worry about the daily necessities of life. He doesn't dismiss their importance; he just emphasizes that they're not what's most important! He tells his disciples *not to worry* about these things. After all, life is more than food and the body more than clothes. He points to the ravens and how God cares for them, and tells them that they're far more valuable to God than birds!

Furthermore, if a person couldn't add even an hour to life by worrying, why worry about even bigger things? Then Jesus points to the lilies and how God clothes them, though they're here today and used for kindling tomorrow! Won't God clothe his people much more?

Jesus says that worry is pagan, because our heavenly Father knows what his children need! We should rather seek God's kingdom, and these things will be given to us as well.

Now the kingdom is God's reign and rule in our lives and in the world. Jesus says his disciples can seek it confidently, because it's the "Father's good pleasure to give it" (12:32, RSV)! So believers, rather than hoarding earthly possessions, should use them to make heavenly investments; after all, one's heart will be where his or her treasure is!

Yet how many times do we Christians worry about these things?! Worry stems from lack of trust in God! He knows we need the basic necessities for survival, and he will provide them as we trust in him and seek his kingdom!

So that's another way that material things become a spiritual matter—*when we confuse them with living under God's rule.*

The point of it all is that God's reign is the most important thing in life. It must be our focus! We must never allow greed and worry to divert our attention from it. The kingdom is far more important than possessions or even survival!

You see, the problem is not material things or possessions. They are generally neither good nor bad. The problem is our dependence on them! We must seek God's kingdom with a single mind and a pure heart. We must lay up heavenly treasure that won't be subject to theft and decay. Then our hearts will be in heaven, for God's will and reign will be what really matters to us!

Putting things in the right place

When we submit our material possessions and our material needs to God as we seek his kingdom and store up our treasure in heaven, then material things become a spiritual matter in the very best sense! In other words, *the way we relate to material things is ultimately a spiritual matter.*

So what will this look like for us as Christians living in 21st century American culture? How do we do what Jesus is talking about here?

Well, first and foremost, *we must trust God with ourselves, our possessions, and our needs.* Whatever we have ultimately comes from him, because *it all belongs to him.* And we can be confident that if there's something we truly need but don't have, God will provide for it as we trust him and live in obedience to his word and his ways. When we truly trust ourselves to God, we can trust him with both our possessions and our needs.

Now that can be challenging, because if we're not seeking God's kingdom, our agenda for

our material possessions and needs may be very different from God's. But we have to keep coming back to the fact that he is our loving heavenly Father who knows our needs and will provide us with everything we need to do his will.

Really trusting God leads us to the second thing we have to do. *We must use our material possessions for spiritual purposes.* God entrusts us with whatever we have, however much or little, as stewards. Sometimes using material possessions for spiritual purposes will look very material. For instance, God expects us to provide for our families. Clothing our children and putting a roof over our family's head and food on the table all have a very material appearance to them. But these things really fulfill a spiritual purpose, because they demonstrate our love and care for our families and foster a sense of emotional as well as physical security for them.

Likewise, as followers of Jesus, *we must use our material goods to participate in God's work in the world.* There is little we do as a church in the way of mission and ministry that does not have a financial cost and require money. Whether we have much or little in the way of material things, one way that God has ordained that his people support and participate in his work in the world is through proportionate, systematic, sacrificial giving—not to a budget, but to the cause and mission of Christ!

When we do that, we are in truth making heavenly investments, storing up our treasure in heaven. And that's critical.

Because that most important thing to remember about how we relate to material things is that *our hearts will ultimately be where our treasure—what really means most to us—is.*

So where is your treasure?

It really is a spiritual matter!

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