

Luke 12:13-21

My paternal grandfather was one of eight children. There were six brothers and two sisters. By the time their parents had both died, so too had two of the brothers – they lost their lives in World War One. So when the estate came to be divided up, there were four surviving boys and the two girls.

However, the will left the estate entirely to the boys, with nothing for the girls. My grandfather thought this was unfair and said to his brothers that they should share the inheritance with their sisters.

But his brothers refused to share with their sisters. And moreover, for his troubles, my grandfather and grandmother, along with my father, who was a small boy at the time, were thrown out of the family home. They put their limited possessions in a wheelbarrow as they went to find somewhere else to live.

Where there's a will, there's a war.

A former Superintendent of mine told me that one skill he wasn't trained for at college was breaking up family fights at the crematorium after a funeral.

'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me,' says a member of the crowd to Jesus (verse 13). If the person was not the eldest child, they might feel aggrieved. For in Jewish tradition the eldest son received the 'double portion' of the estate – twice as much as his younger siblings.

So surely this is a justice issue? And surely Jesus will speak out?

No.

Jesus knows something else is at work. Not justice, but greed.

'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.' (Verse 15)

Well, how contemporary does that sound? And whether or not we are all wealthy, we are surrounded by it in our society, where much of our economy depends on people buying what they don't need. And we're certainly surrounded by it in Surrey, to the extent that when I first arrived in this area one of the other ministers asked at a staff meeting, 'Is the Gospel against Surrey?'

And the indoctrination starts young. At our first Christmas here, our children felt the odd ones out because they didn't go skiing in December. The next summer, our son was told he hadn't had a real holiday because he hadn't been on an aeroplane.

When we think life is about the abundance of possessions, we are saying 'No' to God. We are replacing the one true God with a rival false god called Mammon.

Make no mistake, a lot of the language in our society around possessions is religious. Think of all the times you have been told that a particular item is a 'must-have'. Is it really? That's the language worship and idolatry. God is our only must-have.

But, you say, there are certain possessions that we need in order to live and function in our world. I agree with you. We cannot live without material things. God made a material world and we are material beings. Of course we need certain things. I am not about to suggest that we should all sell up and disappear to become hermits.

It makes our use of money and possessions into a spiritual exercise. The way we use what is given to us needs to be as much a matter of prayer and discernment as anything else we do.

I want to suggest three principles we need to remember if we are to treat money and possessions in a godly way.

The **first** is **stewardship**. What do I mean by this? That what we have is not ours but on trust to us from God, and that we manage it on his behalf. I think this is the meaning of Genesis chapter 1, where God makes human beings in his image and tells them to rule over the earth. The earth does not become the possession of people, because God made it, but God makes human beings to be his stewards, his delegated managers, looking after it wisely for the Master.

You'll notice I'm using the words 'steward' and 'manager' interchangeably. A steward is a manager. And the thing about managers is that they are not the people with final authority. They only have delegated authority from above. And that's our position. Items do not ultimately belong to us. We manage them on behalf of our God, to whom they truly belong.

In that sense, it's tricky even to use the word 'possessions', even though Jesus uses it. Because in the final analysis it is God who possesses them, not us. They are on loan to us from God, and we shall be accountable for our trust.

The farmer in Jesus' parable takes no account of this truth. He is going to make decision about all the grain himself and for himself (verse 18).

In fact, if we're not careful, the big problem is not that we possess things but that things possess us. How dangerous is that? We no longer have self-control, because other things control us.

And in that sense, we are involved here both in idolatry and in addiction, something the farmer accidentally confesses with his desire to 'eat, drink and be merry' (verse 18).

Are there any possessions in our lives where we need to hand them back to God? Do we need to say, Lord, I'm sorry that I have treated this item as if it were wholly mine. Here it is, I return it to you. If you let me keep it, I will use it for your glory.

When we came to Surrey we realised that there was a popular but expensive hobby: golf. However, I already had an expensive hobby, and that is photography. The cost of using what I consider proper equipment as opposed to a smartphone is high. It therefore means that I have to be careful with my spending on new equipment. Photographers talk about people who suffer from GAS – and before you think that's an unfortunate antisocial bodily problem, I should tell you that GAS stands for Gear Acquisition Syndrome. Even unbelieving photographers know that the continual lust for just one more piece of equipment is misguided and dangerous. I have to be sure I am dedicating the gear I use to God and not to myself.

And that leads me to the **second** principle: **prayer**. How are we going to show we have regard for God in the use of those things he has entrusted to our care? Surely a major part of the answer is that we consult him. That means prayer. Tragically, the farmer in Jesus' parable has no place for prayer. All he does is gather the grain for his own benefit. Think of the poor who would have suffered from not having what they needed, had this story been true.

We have a recent example of this on a major scale in our world with the Russian blockade of Ukrainian grain and the millions facing starvation as a result. That's what happens when you think you can do what you like with

worldly goods, and when your belief in God is either non-existent or mere lip service.

In some cases, God has already given us the wisdom we need in order to know what to do with material things. The Bible shows us plenty of things about his general will for life and the world.

But in other cases we need the step of discernment that prayer provides. Last week when preaching about the Lord's Prayer I told a story about how some years ago I had been thinking about buying a computer but wasn't sure whether to spend that large amount of money, until I received a word from God from a friend who had no idea I was contemplating this.

Recently we had to replace our big desktop computer in the study, because our old one was causing too many problems and it's a necessary piece of equipment for my work and for modern life. But I also have a laptop computer that I take with me to meetings, and last year the manufacturer said that it was now too old for them to provide support for it if it went wrong. So I've researched what would be a good replacement, and I think I know.

However, even though I have looked at examples of my proposed replacement online and seen one or two go for attractive prices, I have not bought one yet. For every time I see a replacement I feel uneasy. Without a sense of peace from God I'm not happy to proceed.

Why? Prayer can make it clear it's right to buy, it's wrong to buy, or it's right to wait. And that's where I am at present, waiting. It's God's call, not mine. I can cope until then.

The **third** and final principle here is ***giving***. In the parable, the punchline is that God castigates those who don't give.

'But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

'This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.'

(Verses 20-21)

‘Not rich towards God.’ Put another way, not a giver. Being rich towards God has echoes of Jesus’ language elsewhere about ‘treasures in heaven’, which we know means giving and other good deeds.

If we want a good way of dethroning Mammon in our life and worshipping the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then giving will aid us in that goal.

Now just to raise the issue of giving is to risk navigating a tricky subject. Christians disagree about how much we should give. It’s also a sensitive issue at present with rising inflation and other bad economic conditions.

Some Christian argue we should all tithe, that is, give one tenth of our income. They usually say it should all go to the local church, and any other giving should be on top of that.

It’s tricky to translate tithing directly from the Bible, because it was not usually a tenth of income but a tenth of the crops they harvested. But what is clear is that our giving should be proportional to our income, because the Apostle Paul says as much in 2 Corinthians 9.

It’s certainly also important in biblical terms to give to the poor (or those working with them) and to the cause of Christian mission. You can see examples of these in the New Testament, notably the book of Acts but also in some of the instructions the Apostle Paul gives to those early churches in his letters.

Forgive me for not giving you a simple answer. I would simply say that giving is part of our stewardship and must also be approached in prayer. Just make sure that in praying about your giving you are not saying, ‘How little can I get away with giving?’ but ‘How much can I give?’ The former would be like the farmer; the latter would be like a Christian disciple.