

“SEVEN WORDS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE:  
IV – ENOUGH & V – WOW!”  
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February 9, 2020

2 Chronicles 7:1-3

Luke 12:15-21

A few days ago, actually on Monday, when I sat down and started to work on this sermon, I opened up my Bible, started to read the Gospel passage and knew I was in trouble. Why? Well, you heard it. A man comes to Jesus and says, “I have ample goods laid up for many years.”

I have ample goods . . . in other words, I have lots and lots of stuff. Anybody here identify with that?

I sure do, and I’m sure the fact that I have to move in five months or so, is the reason it’s heavy on my mind these days. You know, I moved into that big parsonage twenty years ago last month, and I distinctly remember promising myself that I would not fill it. But fill it I did, and now, it’s overwhelming to think about moving all of it – check that, downsizing and moving some of it!

How about you? Do you have too much stuff? If you're a typical American, you probably do. I read lots of interesting information this week about how we, as Americans, more than most people in the world collect stuff. Our houses are bigger than most homes in the world, with the exception of Australia. American homes average over 2000 square feet, whereas most homes in Europe are around 1200, and England is just 900. Those are not exact figures, but you get the picture.

We have big houses. Why? To store all of our stuff.

Now, you might not have a big house, but even a small house can be filled with stuff. Hear what one pastor had to say about it: "Our closets accumulate stuff. Bedrooms, kitchens and bookshelves sag from plenitude. Wanted and needed items quickly lose their ability to spark joy in us . . . and then we find new stuff to want, need and accumulate. Before we know it, our dwelling place, our homes, transform into overstocked barns . . . It is not easy to avoid collecting and accumulating stuff – it is part of our western culture and a part of the modern life of constant change and consumption." (On-line, Anne Grethe Kroegh Nielsen, "Barns of Possession or Hearts of Treasures," 8/4/19)

The question is: Is it wrong to have so much stuff? Well, no, not in and of itself. The question is, actually the questions that Jesus raise in the Gospel lesson, are – what does your stuff mean to you, and what do you do with it?

Clearly, the rich man who was speaking with Jesus loved his stuff. He loved it so much that he was thinking of tearing down one barn to replace it with a bigger one, in which to put his “ample goods.” But here’s the thing. I don’t know if you noticed but when the man was talking to Jesus, he never mentioned anyone but himself. His words were all “I” and “me.” He never mentioned another soul. His thoughts are on his possessions, how he made them, how he could keep them, how they would serve him well. But never did he mention concern for anyone else.

And Jesus saw right through his words. And I’ll bet it actually broke his heart. Here was this man with plenty, more than plenty. He could do so much good if he used those gifts, that God had given him, by the way, to help others. Instead he wanted to store them up for his use and his alone.

He was greedy, which prompted Jesus to say to him, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Jesus was looking into the eyes of a man who only thought of himself, getting things for himself and keeping them for himself. And he wanted more for him. He wanted him to know the joy, the fulfillment of sharing what you’ve been given with others.

You know, I read a story this week from a pastor who was reflecting back on all the funerals he had done. And he said this: “I have heard many different regrets expressed by people near the end of life, but there is one regret I have never heard expressed. I have never heard anyone say, ‘I wish I hadn’t given so much away. I wish I had kept more for myself.’”

Jesus wanted that man to open his heart and use the abundant gifts God had given him to help others – and he wants that for us too.

Clearly, another thing he wanted that man to do (and us too) is to keep our “stuff” in perspective. It’s just stuff. It doesn’t add meaning to our lives. More stuff doesn’t make us more important. More stuff doesn’t add value to who we are as children of God. It’s just stuff. And, as the old saying goes, you can’t take it with you.

There’s a movie called “Civil Action” in which John Travolta played a lawyer fighting a large company accused of harming the environment. Unfortunately, this lawyer and his small firm are no match for the giant legal group that represented the company. Little by little, the corporation manages to take away all of the lawyer’s resources and destroys his firm. There comes a scene in the movie where Travolta stands before the bankruptcy judge and tells him that \$14 and a portable radio are all the possessions he has left in the world. And do you know what the judge said back to him? “Where are all the things that you should accumulate in life to give you your identity?” (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 100)

How sad is that? And yet, too often, we get caught up in that lie, that stuff gives us our identity – a bigger house, nicer car, designer clothes, the latest technology. Jesus would remind us that it’s all just that in the end, it’s stuff – it’s

not who you are. It's what he was trying to get that man in the lesson to understand.

It was also what he was trying to get that man to understand before it was too late! You heard his words: "This very night your life is being demanded of you." In other words, your life could end this very day, and then, what would all that stuff mean? Again, he's trying to help this man change, to keep things in the proper perspective, to keep his mind focused on treasure, not possessions.

And he's trying to do the same with us, as well. To help us keep our stuff in proper perspective, to help us know the difference between possessions and true treasures in life. Which brings me to the second word of the day "Wow!" I am convinced that once we make that shift from accumulating more stuff for ourselves, to using the gifts God has given us for ourselves and others, and seeing them for what they are, means to an end, not our identity itself, we'll begin to see everything around us in a whole new way.

One writer put it beautifully: "Moth and rust go after possessions; they can't touch treasures. I possess my house; I treasure my home. I possess food in the

fridge; I treasure nourishment. I possess a cell phone; I treasure connecting with people. I possess a car; I treasure the freedom it offers. I possess a heart; I treasure love.” (Nielsen)

You see the difference? That’s what Jesus wanted that man to understand, and us, as well. When we do, when we get it, we’ll begin to experience life with greater fullness, we’ll have some “Aha” moments, some “wow” moments.

Let me show you what I mean.

I’ve learned recently of many people who have decided not to give actual gifts to people anymore, instead they’re giving “experiences.” They’ve decided that, well, their grandchildren have more stuff than they can possibly use, so instead, they’re giving them experiences, like going to a museum together, or a day at the beach, or a concert, or whatever. The point is that they’ve realized stuff isn’t treasure – time with those precious children is. Picking up another video game or stuffed animal may bring happiness, but time spent in an experience with a parent or grandparent is a “Wow.”

Since it's Scout Sunday, let's look at them for a moment. Any one of them on any given weekend could be closeted at home with headphones on, playing video games for hours on end. Yet, Scouting takes them into the great outdoors where I can imagine their times have been filled with moments of awe and "Wow!" Watching a roaring campfire under the beautiful lights of a fading sunset; seeing a deer run across the path in front of them as they hike through God's creation; seeing the happiness of fellow Scouts as they accomplish what they thought was an impossible task; celebrating with another Scout as he climbs a hurdle he didn't think he could do. "Wow" moments, not centered on stuff, centered on the real treasures of life.

Finally, a story of my own. More than once, when I've met with financial advisors helping me plan for retirement, I've been advised to stop giving away so much money. (Let me just say that I'm not bragging that I give enormous amounts away, but I do tithe, and to some financial people, that's too much.) At any rate, I say "thank you very much for the advice" and do what I want anyway, which is to tithe. Because I know that the money I have, which in the end, is stuff as well, is a gift from God, a treasure to be used to help others.



And here's my "Wow." Listen to this letter I received: "Dear Karen, I send greetings to you, my friend Karen. How is your life over there in America? I think you are good. For me, I am fine and my family members are also good. I would like to thank you for the nice letter you sent to me saying that I should rejoice in the Lord always. I had a colourful birthday at home. Thank you for the birthday gift. I used it to buy a pair of shoes, a pair of shorts, a bat and ball and a hen for my family. Pray for me to work hard in school. I love you. From your friend, Collins Nyakiire."

"Wow!" Collins is a child in Nigeria who I sponsor through Compassion International. It's such a little thing for me to give \$38 a month for him, but look at the joy it brings him. You see, money is not a possession, it's a treasure from God to be used in the best ways we can – and when we do, I promise you, there'll be plenty of "Wow!" moments in life.

That poor man in the Biblical story will never know that joy unless he releases his grip on his stuff, and starts to see it as treasure to be used for himself and others, for the glory of God. And neither will we.

This Gospel lesson, which starts out making us squirm, which starts out as a warning, actually turns out to be an invitation to us all – an invitation to fullness of life, to abundance, to joy. It’s an invitation to see our stuff for what it really is, just stuff, and then to use it for God’s glory. And to know the joy and fulfillment of living that way.

Let me finish with one final story – an old fable shared by Tony Campolo. It’s the story of the ant and the grasshopper. Tony says: “As a boy growing up, I was often told the story about the ant and the grasshopper. My teachers at school explained to me that during the summer the grasshopper just played and played and never stored anything up for the wintertime. The ant, on the other hand, worked diligently day and night. When the winter came, the ant had enough to eat and he survived the winter, whereas the grasshopper died as soon as winter came.”

“That was supposed to be (Tony says) a sufficient warning that we should work constantly and not take time to play around. But one of the boys in my fifth-grade class raised his hand and said, ‘But isn’t it true that the ant also died? And he died without living at all?’ (Campolo, p. 178)

Friends, it's all about balance. It's about working and accumulating stuff, yes, but then it's about using that "stuff" to really live, using it for the glory of God. My prayer is that all of us will take our "enough" and using it, experience the "Wow" of sharing our treasures. May it be so.

Amen.