

Taking It with You

In the name of him who bought us with his blood, dear friends in Christ: A few years back an enormous “Powerball” lottery jackpot was won by thirteen factory workers in Ohio. They split over 160 million dollars, which, after taxes leaves them just a little over six million apiece. Imagine what that would be like: to suddenly have six million dollars land in your lap. Now, to be more accurate, that will probably come to them over a period of years; like 300 thousand a year for twenty years – and remember, that’s *after* taxes. So these folks are “set for life”, as they say. With even the most basic investment planning they can guarantee having a six or seven digit income for the rest of their lives. They never have to work another day. How would you like that to happen to you? I doubt there’s anyone here who wouldn’t want it.

This may sound a bit surprising, but I honestly don’t know whether to be happy for the winners or to pity them. It’s hard to know whether they have received a blessing or a curse. They naively announced that they didn’t plan to quit their jobs. I wonder how long that lasted. Can you imagine, if you were one of the winners, how difficult it would be in the winter to get up out of bed to be at work at six AM, put up with the traffic and ice, just to get to a hard, dirty line job that you really don’t need; and then having your foreman yell at you about your lackadaisical attitude and habitual lateness? And that’s not to mention the constant pressure from your fellow workers on the line: the envy of the guys that need this job just to survive, the meant-to-be-overheard complaints of the guy whose unemployed brother-in-law could use your job, the barrage of requests from the fellow whose kid needs an operation, or who has this “great idea” for starting a new business so that “*we can get rich together*”; the sudden, very *friendly* appearance of all the relatives you never knew you had ... well, you get the idea.

Now maybe some of you are thinking: “*Yeah, I wish I had those problems. Those I could deal with, not like the problems I have today. I would take the steps necessary to avoid all the potential pitfalls – and I wouldn’t let all that wealth change who I really am.*” No, I don’t suppose so ... but, wouldn’t it be interesting to look at the lives of these winners, say, ten or fifteen years from now? How *would* their lives have changed? How different would the people themselves be? And of the thirteen, how many do you suppose that you would truly be able to describe as happy? How many bitter divorces, custody fights, fights with family and friends, drug and alcohol problems, what have you, might you be able to trace to winning the jackpot? And you can bet that like every one of the other big winners throughout history, they said, “*The money won’t change me. I’ll still be the same old Charlie*”.

And I’d be the first to agree—because that is precisely the problem. Great wealth doesn’t really change anyone. It only allows a person to be who he really is when he doesn’t have to struggle to get by. That is what happens to the man in the parable Jesus tells this morning. We’re told that he was already rich. He probably had a nice house, money in the bank, lots of servants, the first century equivalent of a country club membership ... and he got it fair and square, the Smith Barney way: “*He earned it*”. Of course, it took a lot of work to get where he was, and plenty of work if he wanted to stay there. But this year his ship came in. An incredibly large and unexpected bumper crop had put him in a position where he no longer had to work. With a few sensible measures to protect his assets, he could rest and take life easy and still maintain the high standard of living he had grown accustomed to. And what’s

wrong with that? Isn't the financial position he achieved exactly the same place we would all like to be?

Naturally. We naturally crave that kind of security. It would mean no more worries about money. It would mean peace of mind. It would mean our inner beings would have no more anxiety about the future and what it might bring: because no matter what happened, we could be sure that all the basic necessities of life were going to be covered. That's precisely what the man in the parable says. A literal translation would be: *"I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take your rest: eat, drink, be happy.'" We would all like to say the same thing. It's a built-in desire of all mankind: rest, eat, drink, be happy. Those are good things, so we desire them. **And there's not a thing wrong with that desire.***

What's *wrong* is thinking that financial wealth *will fulfill* that desire. That's the mistake made by the man who asks Jesus to help him get a share of the inheritance; and all too often, it's the same mistake we make when we approach the Lord. This man sees Jesus as a way to get what he really wants: financial security. He's thinking, *"This famous Rabbi, who's overturning the way we've interpreted the rules all these years, will surely see that it's just not fair that the oldest son should get the biggest part of the inheritance just because he had the dumb luck to be born first. Surely Jesus will speak up for equality. And since my brother has been captivated by Jesus' teaching, he'll listen to what Jesus says. And then I'll have what I need to guarantee my future."*

To correct this man's mistaken thinking, Jesus tells the story of the rich fool. *"Here's a guy who got exactly what you're looking for: complete financial security. How much good did it do him?"* It's the same point Solomon makes it in today's reading from Ecclesiastes. Like the rich fool, Solomon had been given the "golden ticket". The difference is that Solomon was also given the gift of wisdom from God so that he could recognize before he died that his vast wealth was ultimately meaningless. *"I gave up my heart to despair over all my toils ... because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to someone who has not toiled for it. This is a vanity and a great evil."*

The worn-out cliché remains true: *You can't take it with you.* The money gets left behind – and not just the money and all the stuff it buys, but also the fame, honor, trophies, achievements, diplomas, and awards; but more importantly, so does the **security** that they provide. And *that's* the real issue. That's why we accumulate all those things: to achieve *security* ... peace of mind, rest, and satisfaction. The point is that since you cannot keep those things, neither can you keep the security – and security which cannot be kept, really isn't security at all. It's like buying auto insurance that includes a clause that says you're completely covered unless you have an accident, at which time the coverage becomes void. Only a fool would buy a policy like that. And yet that's exactly what we do when we pursue the goal of trying to find security in the things of this world.

So it is to fools like you and me that St. Paul writes: *"If you have been raised with Christ ... Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."* I want you to look at this piece of paper – a little object lesson here. [Hold up a piece of white paper] This represents your whole life, from the day you were conceived and throughout all eternity. I have taken a black magic marker and shaded the portion that represents your life on this earth. Do you see it? [There is no mark.] Well, do you? ... No? You got it: that's the point.

Against the backdrop of eternity, your earthly “three score and ten years”, give or take a few, don’t even show up. So where should your focus be, on this life or the next? And if the built in desire of our hearts is to have security: to rest, eat, drink, and be satisfied, shouldn’t we seek security in the portion of our lives that really matters? Shouldn’t we plant the seeds now that will bear fruit here? [Pointing to the white paper].

We could take it a step further. Paul says that we were “raised with Christ”. That means we were dead already. In Baptism we were buried and then *raised with Christ spiritually*. In a very real sense, we are already living some of our lives on the white part of the paper. Part of each of us is living beyond the grave right now. But in what sense are we there? What part of our lives is already in the white – in eternity? Well, Jesus says “*one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*” So let’s rule out all the things of this life; all the money and possessions. We know that if Christ doesn’t come first, the bodies we now possess will die and decay. We’ll get them back one day better than ever before; but for now they don’t belong to eternity either. St. Paul enjoins us to put to death all the baggage of our earthly natures: all our sins and evil thoughts. They don’t have anything to do with our eternal life. What does that leave?

Paul writes, “[*you*] have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator”. There it is: the new “self” within you which was born when you were baptized. We each have one soul, but that soul possesses two natures. One of those natures, the old, sinful one, won’t make it to the white part of the paper. You lose whatever you invest in it. But your new nature is already living there. Whatever you invest in it is something that you will keep forever. That’s how one becomes “rich toward God”, or “stores up treasures in heaven”. That old cliché, “*You can’t take it with you*” is not entirely true.

Listen. We are all looking for security. It’s time we stopped looking for it in the wrong places. It’s time to start building our security in heaven. Let’s tear down those small barns that we have set up in eternity by confining our spiritual life to the absolute minimum, and build bigger ones to hold the treasures we will enjoy forever. How do we do that? What are these treasures and how do we store them?

I’m glad you asked. Our eternal securities are those things which give us lasting rest, peace of mind, and happiness. Our Lord Jesus says, “*Come to me, you who are weary ... I will give you rest*”. We read in the Psalms, “*There is joy in your presence, eternal pleasures at your right hand*”. So, we go to Jesus, like we do right here when we enter this assembly to be with him and hear him. Here there is joy and rest because we are with Jesus. Paul says that our new natures are being renewed in knowledge in the image of the Creator. That happens when we listen to God’s powerful message that gives us this knowledge and transforms us into his image. Solomon writes, “*There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his work*”. And here at the altar we are invited to eat and drink and find the true satisfaction and peace of mind in the concrete certainty that our God loved us and gave his own Son to die for us. These are our eternal securities.

But there are more. When we invest ourselves in these securities, we are being changed. We begin to see things from the eternal perspective even while we still have one foot on the invisible black mark on the paper. So we do things differently, motivated by our new natures, in the here and now. With Christ in us, we do the work of Christ in the world. We comfort the sick, help the needy, pray for people, these sorts of things. These too are

treasures in heaven, as the Spirit says, “*Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on ... they will rest from their labor, and their **deeds** will follow them*”. And that’s not all we can take to the other side. Solomon writes in Proverbs: “*Whoever trusts in riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive ... the fruit of righteousness is a tree of life, and **he who wins souls** is wise*”. How much do you suppose a human soul is worth? A lot more than 160 million dollars, I should guess – and forget about taxes. And by simply sharing the Gospel with others, we can win souls that might otherwise be lost forever; and these too will be part of an eternal treasure.

You *can* “take it with you”. May God give us the wisdom to set our hearts on things above so that we can be rich toward him, and store up treasures in heaven. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!