



# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS

"ONE MAN'S MISTAKE"

Sunday Evening, June 18, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Dr. John R. Claypool

I can think of no subject that is more important to modern American life than the subject of materialism. We are at this moment the most prosperous nation on earth, and this very affluence makes our attitude toward "things" a crucial matter. Because of our abundance, we cannot evade the issue; contemporary life is so intertwined with the material that our relationship to it is bound to be of great personal significance.

The teachings of Jesus are pointed clear on this matter. He was not a naive moralist; nor did He oversimplify the issue by condemning wealth or commending poverty. Jesus recognized that the crux of the matter was not in the amount of one's possessions, but rather in the basic attitude toward them. It is not so much what one has or does not have that matters; it is how one regards and uses his possessions that counts. To illustrate this point, Jesus once told a story about a wealthy farmer. Outwardly, it is a negative warning against a certain pattern of life; implied, however, is a whole "philosophy of things." Let us look at it.

The plot of the story could have happened in any age. Times and customs change, but basic human experience remains the same. This story concerned a farmer who experienced great success. He had more goods than he could store, so he made a decision. He would build bigger barns, retire, and indulge himself in the security of his abundance. "Eat, drink, and be merry," he says to himself, "you are fixed for life." Now this picture is by no means uncommon. We see people everyday who have accumulated money and decide to spend it on themselves. This familiarity with the pattern is why we are so startled at Jesus' reaction. Instead of extolling it as a worthy goal in life, He says bluntly: "The man's a fool. He will die tonight and his whole approach to life will collapse." Here Jesus flatly contradicts a set of values that society has always recognized. He rejects what the world has always accepted. If we want to see this subject from His perspective, we must carefully analyze the basis of His judgment. In what ways was this rich man a fool? Let me suggest three answers.

First he misunderstood the origin of his wealth. If you listen to his musings, it is obvious that he took exclusive credit for his success. The personal pronouns recur in monotonous repetition: "What shall I do, because I have no room to bestow my fruits...This will I do; I will pull down my barns and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul..." On and on he goes; of the sixty-one words in the story, twelve are "I" and "my." He is clearly an egotist, bounded on north and south and east and west by himself. There is no recognition here of any other factor but himself. Is not it strange, and yet so human, that failure is social, but success is solitary? When we fall, we are anxious to associate with others; "misery loves company"; we want others to share the blame and disgrace of our errors. But in our successes we want to be all alone. We forget and ignore the part that others have played, and arrogate for ourselves

Sunday Evening, June 18, 1961

the sole credit. Here was a farmer - of all people - talking exclusively of "I" and "my." The parable begins by saying "the ground...brought forth plentifully." He was the recipient of numerous things over which he had no control - the fertility of the soil, the changing seasons, the rain and sunshine. And most certainly his assistance was not alone divine. Other men had surely shared in his labors. Had he plowed all his fields or built single-handed all his barns? Of course not; but this was all forgotten. He was deluded into thinking that his part was the only part, and such was not true.

Realizing the true origin of wealth is undoubtedly the basis of true stewardship. The claim that God and others have on our possessions is based on their real participation in the production. Since I am not solely responsible for what I possess, I should not have complete control of how it is spent. If we ever faced the fact that we are tenants on God's earth and co-laborers with our brothers, all of our stewardship problems would be solved. Our attitude toward control grows out of our understanding of origin, and it was at this point that the farmer was badly in error. Much of his failure stemmed from his egotistical blindness as to the origin of his wealth.

A second fault was this: he misunderstood the purpose of wealth. Having accumulated a fortune, he came to a crucial crossroads. What would he do now? There was nothing wrong with building bigger barns; the wrong came when he set himself up as the sole benefactor of his wealth. "Eat, drink, and be merry," he says to himself. Indulgence is the end of life, he concludes. In coddling and pampering his body he seeks to fulfill the meaning of existence.

This question of purpose is really the question of basic nature. What are material possessions? Are they ends to be enjoyed for themselves or means to be used for other goals? The testimony of Christianity would support the latter assertion, and this is based on actual experience, for try as they have, men have never been fully satisfied by mere possessions. The deep personal longings of humanity can never be met by an impersonal thing. Whenever men have worshipped material objects there has been frustration, for they seek realization where realization simply does not exist.

Material possessions best fulfill their purpose when they are regarded as tools or instruments. A car can never meet my deepest needs, but it is quite helpful in transporting me from one place to another. Now I do not mean to do violence to the realm of aesthetics, but I believe that the further you move away from the utilitarian approach to things, the further you move away from reality. When things cease to serve a useful purpose and are only for extravagant and unnecessary ends, I doubt the basic rightness of the use. The material world is the basis and means of spiritual growth. It provides the possibility, the context, in which a personality can be grown. When it becomes anything beyond that - an end in itself - there is distortion. The tools in a workshop are there so the craftsman can make something. If he should suddenly quit using them and begin spending all his time collecting and polishing the tools, we would declare him demented. Yet this is what the farmer did with his life. He ceased to make wealth a tool to some eternal end. He began to worship it for its own value.

The third mistake is this: he misunderstood the power of wealth. He confused economic security with eternal security. He assumed "this life was the only life." He lost "the perspective of eternity," and thus established his whole security on the physical and material. Jesus began this parable by drawing a clear distinction between what a man is and what a man has: "A man's life does not consist in the

Sunday Evening, June 18, 1961

abundance of the things which he possesseth." These two must not be confused. One pertains to this life only; the other goes on forever. Therefore it is patently foolish to put all the emphasis on that which is temporary. If I know I cannot take a book with me into an exam room, I would be unwise to base my hope on a book. I had better make the knowledge a part of my own self. And if I know that my personal existence will continue beyond the realm of the physical and material, it is foolish to live only for them.

There is a grim Spanish proverb that says: "There are no pockets in a shroud." It is part of the accepted wisdom of the streets that "you can't take it with you." Not long ago a prominent man died, and a family was discussing his estate at the supper table. Someone asked: "What did he leave?" The old grandmother answered: "Every thing." And that is right - every thing. But he took himself, that personality that was the sum total of his values and decisions in life. Death separates us from the material, and there was irony in Jesus' implication that what we hoard so selfishly is given to others after all - "whose shall these things be?" Death forces us to be generous, and it leaves us bereft of everything but personal and spiritual values. And if we have absolutized the temporal, it means we shall enter eternity stark-naked, impoverished, totally incapable of participating in eternal Reality. Have you ever been in a crowd whose interests were altogether different from yours and therefore you had no common bond? I rode once with a group that were stock car enthusiasts. And because I knew none of the terminology or anything about it, I was utterly bored. This is but a faint anticipation of what it must be like to have centered all in something that is gone, and to be utterly cut off from eternal meaning. The third mistake was one of miscalculation and misplaced value. He thought the power of wealth was enough, and suddenly he found himself beyond the extremity of its reach.

These, then, are some of the reasons Jesus reversed the judgment of society. He called this successful man "a fool." Why? Because he misunderstood the origin of wealth, the purpose of wealth, and the power of wealth.

And remember, if he could be so mistaken, so could you!