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Today's Gospel has a strange twist to it. Jesus tells us about a very successful farmer who reaped a bumper crop, far more than he had expected.

As a good businessman, he planned to increase his capacity, which would give jobs to some construction workers. His success would benefit others. This rich man also planned to relax and enjoy himself.

So, why wasn't this farmer a hero in the parable? Jesus did not accuse him of even the slightest misdeed. Don't we hope to get ahead on our jobs, be able to provide for ourselves and our loved ones, and have some fun? If we're comfortably retired, maybe we're glad that we already did this, more or less. What's wrong with that?

Jesus looked deeper than outward behavior and focused on a basic attitude toward possessions. By world standards, the vast majority of us Americans are wealthy. So his warnings apply to us.

Today's lessons illustrates least three dangers of the material wealth that so many of us enjoy. The first is that it only can do only so much, the second is that it can be addictive, and the third involves a missed opportunity.

Today's first lesson focuses on the first danger. We can work hard, make a lot of money, and leave it all to lazy or foolish people who waste every last cent. Worse yet, forces of nature or human stupidity can take it all away while we're still alive.

Jesus reminds us that no matter how much power, wealth, and fame we acquire, we all die, sooner or later. When you come right down to it, all that we have is just on loan to us for just a little while, and this loan can be foreclosed at any instant.

What we own can give us only so much of the world's peace, probably a lot less than we think it will. Maybe that's one of the reasons why we almost always want more.

This leads to the second danger, addiction. Striving to get more and better can be like compulsive eating. Something we need to live becomes something we live to have, far more than we need, regardless of the damage that this striving does.

In so many ways, we humans keep carrying so many good things to the point of doing so much harm. It's natural to want enough to be well fed, well clothed, well housed, well educated, and well treated medically. It's amazing how the definition of "enough" keeps getting more demanding, more expensive, and more consuming. The luxury items of one generation become the necessities of the next, all at a price, in more ways than one.

Once we pass the point of having what we actually need to survive, our stuff becomes how we feel successful, how we form relationships, and how we try to get the peace that the world can give. Here's the danger. Striving for this worldly peace distorts our own lives, and it also makes our world more dangerous, which of course means that we spend more on security, taxes, and insurance.

When the things of this world direct our lives, that is what the Bible calls idolatry. That always ends badly.

So what's a Christian alternative? This is the opportunity.

Imagine that the rich farmer in the parable had prayed something like this, "Thank you Lord for providing so well for my family, my servants, and me. I realize that all I have is yours, entrusted to me to manage for you. Lord, I want you to use

my blessings as one small way for your kingdom to come and your will to be done here and now. So guide what I do.

“Do you want me to build a barn and save for a time of famine as Joseph did in Egypt? How much do you want me to give away in order to channel your love in this part of your world? By the way, would it be ok to throw a party for the neighbors to celebrate all you've done for me?”

“Lord, keep me from loving your gifts more than I love you, and use my wealth as a way that I serve you.”

If the rich man prayed this kind of prayer and really listened for God's answer, how different would his story have been? He still might have built the same barns, or maybe not.

But either way, his relationship with God would have been much different, both in life and in death. In one way or another, God actually may have advanced his rule through this man's willing partnership.

Here's the warning. There is a real danger in asking God to guide us, for this just may lead us in the direction of sacrificial love. The specifics are different for everybody, but the basics are the same.

Sacrificial love for God means that something of our selfishness and our willfulness will keep dying. It means that our basic priorities may be a lot different from those of some other people in our lives. Sacrificial love means that doing God's will on earth as it's done in heaven really does come first to us. If we dare to pray sincerely that God use the material goods that are on loan to us to do his will, then he just may lead us where we would not go on our own.

The Bible teaches us that where God leads is better, that the things above where Christ is are far better than even the greatest goods on earth below. Scripture teaches us that God offers us blessings that go far beyond the temporary attractions of this dying world, blessings that death cannot destroy. We don't know the specifics until Jesus comes again; but we've been told on good authority that God promises us a joy, a peace, and a love which that go far beyond the very best that we can imagine.

The test of faith is less a matter of what we say, and more a matter of what we do. It's a matter of how our Lord's teachings show up in our actual behavior. In one way or another, our faith is reflected in our finances and our calendars.

The problem with the rich man in the parable was not that he had too much, but that he had too little. Sure, he needed material goods for this life, and much in the Bible shows that it's ok to have some fun. But this man forgot that there is an eternal life that's a lot more important than any of this.

The blessings of eternal life are already ours, beginning anew now. They were bought for us not with silver and gold, but with the holy and precious blood of God the Son, with his innocent suffering and death.

Jesus already has made us rich toward God. This is his gift, for us to receive through faith and to share through how we live our lives. May our faith guide how we manage the wealth that God gives us. Amen.

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