

THE B.B.B. SEAL of Approval

Sermon, July 31, 2016

Text: Luke 12: 13-21

I must confess the sermon title was a bit of a stretch when I created it (*more often than not, due to bulletin deadlines, the title is made up long before the sermon is complete*), and during the editing in the course of the week the connection became even more remote, but let me just give a quick summary of my original thought. This sermon is about "B.B.B." ... Better Barn Building. It's about where and how we are to better "store" the fruit of our labors and the blessings we receive; it is about how to best use our riches and how to guard against our blessings causing us to lose sight of who we are called to be and what we are called to do.

The real B.B.B., the Better Business Bureau, is, officially, a nonprofit organization focused on advancing marketplace trust between consumers and the businesses they patronize; it consists of 102 independently incorporated local B.B.B. organizations in the USA. The B.B.B. collects and provides business reviews on more than four million businesses; if a business meets the B.B.B. qualifications, it receives the B.B.B. Seal of Approval. However, in recent years **Time** magazine and ABC's **20/20** program¹ both ran disturbing exposes on the apparent B.B.B. practice in some regions of giving higher ratings to businesses that pay a membership fee. ABC's 20/20 reported in a segment titled "The Best Ratings Money Can Buy" about something of a "pay to play" scandal in the Los Angeles B.B.B.; business owners there were told that the *only* way to improve their rating was by paying the annual fee. In one case a "C" was turned to an "A" immediately after a payment was made and in another case a "C-minus" became an "A+." Chef Wolfgang Puck reported some of his businesses receive "F's" because he refuses to pay a fee. One investigative reporter created two dummy companies ... companies that did not actually exist (*one he actually named "Hamas" after the terrorist organization of the same name*) ... and both non-existent companies received "A+" ratings immediately after he paid the membership fees.

As a CNN Money report put it,² the Better Business Bureau may be a nonprofit, but behind the scenes in several branches it's a money-making machine squeezing big money out of businesses in exchange for its coveted seal of approval ... while paying its executive officers somewhat staggering six figure salaries. Depending on the size of a business, membership fees range from hundreds of dollars to more than \$10,000 a year. Joseph Ridout, a spokesperson for Consumer Action, said this structure, where the B.B.B. is "*funded by the dues-paying businesses and not the consumers,*" presents a "*serious conflict of interest*" that really works to erode marketplace trust, rather than advance it. In such cases, this has caused to B.B.B. to lose sight of its purpose, of its reason for being. Rather than advancing marketplace trust between customers and business, this apparent "love of money" is actually working to erode that trust. But this isn't about *that* B.B.B. ... this sermon is about Better Barn Building. We are not to let money or the acquisition of money and goods cause us to let us lose sight of who we are called to be and what we are called to do. We are to be lovers not of money, but lovers of God ... and then use whatever money and blessings He brings our way accordingly, thus storing up riches in the barns of heaven.

The usual interpretation of this parable in Luke 12 is that this speaks of the folly of a life devoted to the accumulation of wealth. The foolishness becomes obvious, so the usual interpretation goes, when suddenly one night God calls in His "loan," the loan of this man's life (*the word translated here as "demand" is the word then used in the Greek world for the return of a loan.*) Then, the traditional interpretation goes, everyone sees with tragic clarity the utter folly of it all, that it was stupid and foolish, if not sinful, for this man to amass riches. Well, one trouble with this traditional interpretation of the text is that it does not square with our experience and our common sense. We can, and indeed we should, find great satisfaction and pleasure in the rewards of work and the extra blessings good fortune often brings our way. We do not find working, and the accumulation of those things which come as a result of our work, to be foolish or somehow evil. To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with having money. There is nothing inherently wrong with making money (*unless you are a counterfeiter, and/or gaining it by illicit means!*). Money in itself is not evil. By itself, money is an amoral force, like the force of electricity, which can light a church or light a brothel. Money can fund a mercenary or it can fund a missionary; like electricity, it is a force that can do much good OR much harm. It's not a perfect analogy, but attaining wealth is like upgrading from a bicycle to a car. You can give more people a ride with an automobile, you can be of great service to others with a car, but you can also become more dangerous and more of a menace to others and yourself behind the wheel of a car (*something any parent of teenagers can certainly relate to!*). You can help or hurt, you can serve others or you can run over them, you can add to the quality of your life and the life of others, or you can injure or even kill yourself and/or others if you don't handle such a powerful force with responsibility and care. Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with having and

¹ See <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/business-bureau-best-ratings-money-buy/story?id=12123843> and <http://business.time.com/2013/03/19/why-the-better-business-bureau-should-give-itself-a-bad-grade/>

² See <http://money.cnn.com/2015/09/30/news/better-business-bureau-millions/>

earning money; in fact, it is a mark of maturity, responsibility, and integrity to produce and earn and save, if you are physically able. One of the most foolish things we can do with money is to pietistically deny its importance. A person with no money in our society is in trouble, and usually becomes a burden to others. The man in Jesus' parable was rich; nothing wrong with that. In fact, many of us would do well to give more attention to our finances. However, the Bible warns against becoming a *lover* of money. We aren't to love money; we are to love God. Loving money without loving and honoring God and His divine principles can and often does distort our priorities, causing us to lose sight of who we are, who we were created to be and what we were created to do.

In our Gospel reading, we're told "*... someone in the crowd said to him ...*" What crowd? See verse 1 of chapter 12 ... a crowd of *many thousands* had gathered, so many that they were trampling on one another. Jesus spoke primarily to His disciples, but loudly enough that many in this crowd could listen in; He did this frequently throughout the Gospels, and oftentimes several in those overhearing crowds overheard enough to make them want to be disciples as well (*which seems to be Jesus' primary method of evangelism!*). Well, one man in that overhearing and immense crowd stood up and called out, "*Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.*" The brother here wants his share; he wants what he believes he is entitled to, and he wants Jesus to intervene. So, he calls out from the crowd and asks ... no, actually he calls out to Jesus and *demand*s, in so many words, "*You tell my brother to give me my rights!*"

Just as an aside, if you want to irritate Jesus, you come to Him and demand your rights ... you come to Him and demand what's coming to you, and He might just respond accordingly! He might just give you what you deserve ... and trust me on this, you may not want that. I certainly don't want Jesus to give *me* what I deserve; I want Him to be my Savior Whose grace *rescues* me from what I really deserve ... but that's almost another sermon! Let's look at the context: This man is not asking for advice or guidance from Jesus; rather, he is actually ordering Jesus around. He has already decided what he wants and he tries to enlist Jesus to fight his battle. This is the man in the crowd who wants Jesus to preach to someone else, not him! "*You tell him, Jesus! You tell my brother what He should do. I've already decided what I want, this is what I think should happen, this is how things should be run, and if you, Jesus, will only do what I want, then everything will be OK.*" It just doesn't work that way! No, *He's* the Master, *we're* the servants. Jesus is more prone to respond favorably when we approach Him as Lord and Master and seek to live His way, rather than when we treat Him as our servant and demand our way. I like how I once heard it: a mark of Christian maturity is when we realize Jesus is not our celestial bellhop awaiting our beck and call to serve us, but that we are to be His bellhops at His beck and call, awaiting our opportunity (*and privilege!*) to serve Him.

Jesus replied rather gruffly, "*Man! Who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?*" An arbiter was a *divider* of sorts, helping arbitrate who got this and who got that, and so on. As an aside, what would be the opposite of a divider? A "uniter," a *reconciler*. Jesus wants to foster reconciliation; He doesn't always respond kindly to those who try to enlist Him on the side of division rather than reconciliation. Jesus said to all who were listening, "*Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*" (*left out of the spoken sermon was the following: "The phrase 'all kinds of greed' is a translation of the Greek 'pleon esias' which literally means the 'more and more' desires. Other translations render this 'insatiable desires,' an apt phrase!*). Jesus then launches into this parable.

Now again, Jesus did not condemn the man in the parable for being rich. The rich man was foolish not for having money, but because of what he planned to do (*or not do*) with that money. He was called foolish because all he wanted to do was to build bigger barns to keep it all for himself. "*What shall I do for I have nowhere to store my crops?*" Well, the truth of the matter is he *has* barns. And barns are good! Ask the Amish, who are among the most selflessly generous and genuinely faithful people in our nation ... they are renowned for barn building; indeed, "barn raising" is a uniquely Amish community celebration! There is nothing wrong with barns! I think this man's sin was not that he had become wealthy, and not even that he wanted to build better barns, but his foolishness and sin is evidenced in that he wanted to selfishly hoard all his wealth and goodies for himself. In short, he was becoming something of a clogged bottleneck in the flow of God's blessings through him to others. I think the parable would have a different ending if the man had recognized he had more than enough for himself and went on to plan to share his surplus by finding ways to maximize his "B.B.B." ... his blessings for the benefit and betterment of others.

Notice, too, that Jesus never directly answers the man's original request. Rather, Jesus drives home the point that all that we have, even our very souls, are on loan from God ... so live your lives accordingly. Do not let money or the acquisition of money and goods let us lose sight of who we are called to be and what we are called to do. We are to be lovers not of money, but lovers of God ... and then use whatever money and blessings He brings our way accordingly, and thus storing up riches in the "barns" of heaven. He chooses to remind this man and the thousands within earshot that there are things far greater than just getting our share of wealth, among them are our relationships with the only two "things" that last forever ... God and people. The rich man was foolish not for having wealth but because of what he planned to do, or not to do, with that wealth. He wanted to do nothing more than build bigger barns to stash all his blessings, rather than think of ways to be a distribution center that could provide a way to channel this wealth of blessings to others. All we have is on loan from God, even our very lives, and we are to use it all accordingly. Don't stash it, don't hoard it, don't keep it all to yourself. Invest your surplus, invest your time, your energy, your finances in eternal things, and become (*as Jesus says in verse 23*) rich toward God.