

More and More Stuff  
November 25, 2018  
Luke 12:13-21

*13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." 14 But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." 16 Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 18 Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."*

I have a few questions for you this morning. Don't worry, I'm not going to put you on the spot. You can keep your answers to yourselves. Here we go:

- Do you have so much stuff stored in your garage that there is no room for a car?
- Do you have a collection of something, say Beanie Babies or some such thing, that you thought would one day be a valuable collection?
- Do you have a storage unit?
- Have you purchased plastic items from the dollar store that you knew you would throw away after one use?
- Have you recently discovered that no one wants your well-made Mediterranean bedroom set?
- Do you spend work time or family time clicking on ads promising big sales and deep discounts on things you don't need?
- Do you have nice things that you don't use because you want to keep them nice?
- Do you have any idea of what you spend on things you don't need any given month?
- Have you ever purchased something that actually lived up to all the promises that made you buy it?
- Are you ashamed of all the stuff in your home?
- Is your stuff making you miserable?

Here we are, 29 days till Christmas, sandwiched between Black Friday and Cyber Monday. 'Tis the season for shopping madness. But then there are after Christmas sales, then New Year's Day sales, then President's Day sales, and Valentines Day. Then we're off to Easter sales, Mother's Day sales, Father's Day sales, Back to School sales, Halloween Sales, and Thanksgiving sales. And then it starts all over again. Then there's Amazon's deal of the day and the dozens of daily emails promising deep discounts and promo codes for special customers. With a single voice command, Alexa will have whatever I want on my doorstep in two days. It never ends. It is a vicious cycle of consumption.

Even if you aren't caught up in it you are still impacted by the stuff everyone else is consuming. It is destroying our planet and studies are now determining that our stuff is making us miserable. When we throw stuff away there is no away – plastic never goes away it just gets moved around.

Before I continue, I want to stop and acknowledge the deep shame that many of us feel about our consumption. We throw our money away buying crap nobody wants or needs and it is hard to stop. We waste food. We throw away things we use once or twice. We fill up our houses to our peril. It

stresses us out. Shame is that voice that tells us we are bad. Using shame to change people doesn't work. I just want you to know that I'm not trying to shame you today. We are in this mess together. We've helped to create a monster that we have the power to tame. I want you to walk out of here with a plan – not pain. So, tell the shame to shut up.

First, we need to admit there is a problem. We are living in the most materially rich society in global history. We are at the point of what one social scientist calls “material saturation.”<sup>1</sup> The average American home has over 300,000 items. The United States is home to 3.1% of the children in the world and yet we consume 40% of all the toys made in the world. Storage units make up the fastest growing segment of the commercial real estate industry.<sup>2</sup> There are over 5.1 trillion pieces of plastic in the ocean.<sup>3</sup> A UCLA study discovered that the number of magnets on the household refrigerator corresponds with accumulation of stuff in a household. The more magnets, the more mess.<sup>4</sup> More mess means more stress.

Why do we do this to ourselves?

“You fool!” the voice thunders from heaven with a James Earl Jones voice. What have we sacrificed for our stuff? Is it worth it?

I wonder if Jesus had fun telling this parable. I wonder if he lowered his voice and spoke the King James when he said, “Thou fool!” If it weren't so tragic it would be funny. Jesus is telling this story to someone in the midst of a grievance with his brother over the family estate. Instead of arbitrating his case, Jesus warns the man about the perils of greed. He told the man that one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Then he tells the story of the fool who stored a bunch of stuff thinking he was going to use it one day. The foolish man was looking forward to kicking back and relaxing. He couldn't wait to eat drink and be merry. Then he died.

Don't you wonder what that foolish man sacrificed for that dream? Do you suppose he alienated his family working hard to accumulate his wealth and filling his barns with more and more?

Credit cards make shopping so painless it is easy to forget the real cost of all this stuff. There isn't a statement at the end of the year that tells you how many hours with friends and family your stuff cost. How many experiences did we trade for stuff? Why can't we stop working for and buying all this stuff?

One reason is that everything in our culture is telling us we aren't enough and we don't have enough. If we just got that one more thing – by golly – that would be the cat's meow – we could kick back and enjoy. But there is always something else. Do you suppose those air fryers really make crispy fries with no oil?

Another reason we consume to our peril is rooted in science. In 2017, the Brain Prize went to three neuroscientists studying how the reward system of the brain affects our decision making. “The chairman of the Brain Prize selection committee said that the winners' work had implications for

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30849473>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2017/05/18/why-hard-stop-buying-more-stuff/TikBK6hUCSN2UkKoSBSel/story.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30849473>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mnn.com/your-home/at-home/blogs/we-are-drowning-stuff-study-shows-it-makes-us-miserable>

“social science, drug addiction, and psychiatry.”<sup>5</sup> One of the recipients of the reward, Wolfram Schultz, describes dopamine neurons as “little devils in our brains” that make us seek more rewards.<sup>6</sup> What scientists are discovering is that the brain’s reward system weighs what behaviors are most rewarding. Then it remembers those behaviors and encourages repetition.

*Our brain’s reward system evolved for survival, encouraging behavior that led to greater consumption, which helps explain some modern-day habits. We often take in more calories than we need because long ago we didn’t know when we’d get our next meal. We get a little rush when we find a parking space close to our destination because an unpredictable food supply encouraged us to save our energy. We get a shopper’s high when buying a new toy or a new television or a new car, because during times of scarcity, any material good was prized.*

*When we do something that our brain values, we receive small bits of dopamine, the brain uses this input to influence what you do next.*

*The upshot: The reward system makes us want to repeat certain behaviors — even when they’re long past the point of being beneficial. In affluent countries, we live in a world of more accessible, more predictable rewards. And the easier it is to get what you want when you want it, the less satisfying it becomes. You need to consume more and more to get the same high. Anyone familiar with addiction to drugs, gambling, food, or shopping understands that dangerous cycle.<sup>7</sup>*

Consumer psychologists also understand this dangerous cycle and they study every kind of science to keep us addicted, in debt, buried in stuff, and wanting more.

So, what can we do? How do we rewire our brains to seek life-giving rewards? Here are a few things that I am going to try this holiday season:

1. Delete, unsubscribe, and turn off temptation. If you are getting a bunch of fresh deals in your inbox every move them to junk or promotions and don’t look at them. Buy because you need something – not because it is a good deal or on sale.
2. Wait before you buy. Decide how long you are going to wait before you purchase something – it could be 20 minutes. For larger purchases it could be overnight. Take a moment to think about what you are buying – be conscious and aware.
3. While waiting do a little math. Think about how long you have to work to pay for the item you are buying.
4. If you need to purchase tools or something used infrequently consider sharing with someone else.
5. Buy quality items and use them more than once.
6. Be creative with what you have.
7. Work on sharing experiences with people rather than giving them more stuff they don’t need.
8. Be grateful. Practice gratitude.

When Jesus told the story of the rich fool he was offering a lesson on the perils of greed. I’m not sure we think of our consumption as a manifestation of greed until we begin to think about how

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2017/05/18/why-hard-stop-buying-more-stuff/TikBKa6hUCSN2UkKoSBSeL/story.html>

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2017/05/18/why-hard-stop-buying-more-stuff/TikBKa6hUCSN2UkKoSBSeL/story.html>

many people and how many resources it takes to produce junk we upgrade or discard without a second thought. But it is greed and Jesus' story is as timely today as it was then.

Before we shop till we drop to celebrate Jesus' birthday I thought it might be good to hear this story again – to think about our traditions – to think about the world Jesus gave his life to bring into existence – to think before we give our lives for stuff no one needs. Think.