

## **The World's Greatest Threat to Your Spiritual Health**

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Renewing Your Spiritual Passion Series

Luke 12:13-22

I've been doing a series that I titled "Renewing Your Spiritual Passion" this fall following my sabbatical this past summer. And over the summer as I got to spend a lot of time with God taking walks and getting refilled again, as I reflected on my own spiritual condition and the spiritual condition of this church, the word "passion" dropped into my heart. The Christian life is all about passion.

You don't just drift into following Jesus. You don't drift into life change. Or drift into repentance. The Christian life, Jesus says, is all about loving God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength. The Christian life that Jesus calls us to live involves total devotion, extreme fervor, and passionate zeal.

As I meditate on this word "passionate" and why I pray that this church would produce passionate followers of Christ, it is because a passionate disciple is someone who is internally motivated. You give, you share your faith, you enter fellowship, you worship, you pray, you study the Bible, you serve other people – not because you have to because your arm is twisted, but because you are alive in Christ. Because you love him.

Now, a few weeks ago I talked about one major barrier to becoming a spiritually passionate person, especially in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that is our sheer busyness. Just the massive commitment overload that leaves no breathing room in our lives to even reflect or think about what God might be saying to us. This massive commitment overload where there is just simply no room for God, no space in your life to pray and feel like you are actually in communication with God.

If the subject of the over-busy, overloaded life, is of interest to you or someone you know, let me offer you two recommendations. The first is that the message I did on the over-busy life is available on tape.

In fact, some of you don't know that all of the messages I do are immediately available after the service on tape. We have a high-speed duplicator and they are on sale immediately following the service at our bookstore.

I would recommend to you that when you hear a message here that seems particularly appropriate for you or someone you know, pick up a tape. Hearing something once just really doesn't get it down into our souls. Hearing something once is sort of a light touch – there's not a great amount of impact. Advertisers say that you have to hear something seven times before you are motivated to do anything with it. I don't know about that, but I do know that we do need to become more disciplined listeners to messages. As you

listen, take notes. That's why we hand out the outlines. And occasionally pick up a tape and see what God may be saying to you.

A second recommendation that I would make is that we have available in the bookstore a book called "Margins." I recommended it a few weeks ago. But I think it is a very important book for the vast majority of us here at this church. I am constantly hearing from people that they are living overstressed, overburdened, over-committed lives. This book "Margins" would be a wonderfully practical book for many of you men to use as the subject for your men's groups. You might read it together and discuss it. Or read it in your women's groups, ladies. Or in your home groups, home group leaders. If you are looking around the room and you say, "WOW, we've got a bunch of overstressed, over-committed people," pick it up. Study the book "Margins" together. Let's get some breathing space back in our lives so that we can actually have an authentic relationship with God.

Now, today, what I want to do is talk about another barrier to real spiritual passion. The first is busyness. But today we are going to talk about what I think the Bible teaches as the world's greatest barrier to your spiritual health and your spiritual life.

Parents, let me ask you a question. What do you believe is the greatest threat to your child's spiritual health in America today? What do you think is the greatest threat to your child's spiritual health? Would some of you say, Harry Potter? Maybe Pokémon?

You know, I think Christian parents can legitimately disagree about the Harry Potter phenomenon. I see all of these Christian books and articles – actually, there's a whole stream of literature and emails written about the dangers of Harry Potter. Christian parents are concerned about what this fad means. But parents, Harry doesn't even register in terms of a spiritual threat to your kids. It's not even on the radar screen compared to what the Bible teaches is the greatest spiritual threat. Neither, in my mind, is Halloween.

Let me just make an aside here. And please don't write to me. Because I think people can legitimately disagree with the dangers associated with Halloween or Harry Potter and all the current interest in fantasy literature. I would say, friends, that in all my years of pastoral ministry and the literally thousands of people I've prayed for over the last twenty seven years and the many people I've prayed for freedom from demonic influence, I've never prayed for anyone who walked away from the Christian faith or who got into the occult because they participated in Halloween or read Harry Potter or the Lord of the Rings or some other fantasy literature.

I have met lots of people, however, who have kicked away from God because they were raised in overly protected Christian families. I've met lots of kids who have kicked away from the rigidity of Christian schools and for a period of time wandered away from their faith, even though they had very loving, very devoted parents.

My own feeling, however, is that we Christian parents get upset and even a bit hysterical about the wrong things. We are consumed by keeping our kids from wearing certain types of clothing. We go high and to the right the first time we discover that one of our kids has tried a cigarette. But so many of the kinds of things we are concerned about regarding our kids or even our selves don't compare at all to what in the Bible is the greatest threat to your children or your spiritual life – at least in America.

And I want you to read this passage with me and underline it in your bibles because we are blind to the threat. 1 Timothy 6:9-10. Here's what we read: *People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*

Listen to this list. Paul talks about temptation, a trap, foolish, harmful desires, being plunged into ruin, destruction, a root of every kind of evil, wandering away from the faith, being pierced with many griefs. Parents, listen to me. Those of you who are worried about dangers to your kids, single people, listen to me...empty nesters, those of you who are married without kids, those of you who are divorced – how many activities would you engage in that the Bible explicitly tells you involves a temptation, a trap, that is foolish, that will plunge you into ruin and destruction and lead you away from the Christian faith and would pierce you through with many griefs?

Jesus spoke about money and possessions as a spiritual threat over and over again in his ministry. If you are taking notes, you might want to jot down the following chapters of scripture: Luke 12; Luke 14; Luke 16; Luke 18. We, as American Christians, have simply filtered out the biblical message about the dangers of excessive accumulation, and consumerism, and materialism. We American Christians, who claim to hold onto the authority of the Bible, we are often really blind to what the Bible actually teaches.

Years ago our church discovered that we kept filtering out the supernatural dimension of Christianity. Back in the mid-1980's, as we got in touch with the Vineyard movement, we were exposed again to the reality that following Jesus means being involved in the ministry of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus everywhere involves praying for the sick, physical healing, deliverance from demonic powers – it is all over the place. But we had these filters up and all these theological explanations for why the supernatural, the miraculous, why signs, wonders and healings shouldn't be part of Christianity today. When we began to read the scriptures the way they were intended to be written, when we embraced the message, it was profound in the life of this church. People started to be healed. Folks in the church got set free from life-long bondages. There was excitement and energy as we began to accommodate the Holy Spirit in our worship.

Well, I'll tell you friends, more amazing than our filtering out of the supernatural, is our filtering out of the warnings in the scriptures concerning excessive accumulation and the dangers of what we call today consumerism or materialism.

Now, I know that today I am treading on dangerous ground. We are talking about a subject that angels might fear to tread, because frankly there is no more sensitive subject to speak to Americans about than money. There's no subject about which an American will get more defensive and have more walls up and more excuses about than money.

And I know that some of the sensitivity about discussing money in church is partly the church's fault. We've had financial scandals in Christian ministries. And I watch TV solicitations and I get nauseated. I mean I get physically nauseated listening to someone sell Jesus for a profit. The reason, here at Vineyard, that we do an annual independent audit of our books and we have an annual congregational meeting (we just held it this past Tuesday night), the reason we go through our financials openly with every church member and answer questions is because we want to assure this church that every dollar goes where we say it's going. And that there are lots of checks and balances in place. We try to be proactive as a church in demonstrating the integrity of a Christian organization so that people know that our organization is above reproach and take away some of the bad taste of the financial scandals.

But I believe, friends, that we have used the issues of various organizations abusing their funds to shield ourselves from actually being confronted by the force of what Jesus and the Bible teaches concerning the dangers of excessive wealth and accumulation.

We're defensive and sensitive in discussions about money because, if you are anything like me, there is self-interest involved in this discussion. I like what money does for me. I like the feeling of security. I don't like feeling insecure. I don't like not knowing exactly what the future might hold. I like the opportunity to buy new things and to visit new locations and to wear new clothes and drive new cars.

You probably like what money does for you too. You might fear, in the deepest part of your being, not having enough money. So you say, "Back off, Rich."

Frankly, there's no subject more threatening, more provoking, about which we have more walls up than the way we Americans relate to our stuff – our home decorations, our clothes, our cars, our computers, our knickknacks, our books, our travel.

Here's my. I have, in the course of my ministry, had easily twenty times more men, maybe fifty times more men confess sexual problems to me. I mean shame producing problems – affairs, pornography use, going to strip clubs, homosexuality and premarital sex. I've had dozens of times more men confess sexual problems to me than I've had confess greed or stinginess or the love of money. It has been a rare person that I've met that has said, "I really love money. I love what it does. I've fallen prey to the trap Paul talked about in 1 Timothy 6."

We Americans are utterly blind to the radicalness of the threat to our spiritual lives by our habits of consumerism. I'm calling today's talk, "The World's Greatest Threat to Your Spiritual Health." Luke 12:13-21.

*Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me to be a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry." But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself, but is not rich toward God.*

The setting for the story Jesus tells is an appeal to Christ for justice regarding the division of an estate. How many of you have experienced in your own families what you consider to be injustice in the way that the estate of a relative has been handled? In my own experience, it is the rare person who handles their estate planning well. It certainly is a gift to your children and your grandchildren if there is real thoughtfulness put into the handling of your estate.

Well, we are not told whether there was justice or injustice done to this particular fellow. Jesus doesn't really address that. Instead, looking into his heart, he sees that there is a deeper issue involved that is threatening his eternal salvation and his relationship with God. So Jesus says in verse 15, *Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.*

Watch out! Be on your guard. You know, there are lots of things that a mature Christian guards themselves against. There are things we know are harmful to our spiritual health. For example, a mature Christian is not going to read their horoscope in a paper or in a magazine, or go to a palm reader. We know that God forbids seeking spiritual information apart from going to him and the scriptures.

There are things that a mature Christian doesn't look at. I get Sports Illustrated. I can tell you that for as long as I've gotten it, and it's probably been at least a decade, my wife throws out the annual swimsuit issue before I get home. Mature Christians are on guard against what they look at. Friends, that certainly concerns what you are looking at on your computer, and what you allow into your homes by way of cable TV and the movies you rent.

Mature Christians understand the principle of guarding their spiritual health. Let me ask you a question: Do you listen to Jesus and exercise the same level of vigilance concerning every form of greed? Do you guard your heart from covetousness to the same degree you guard your heart from stimulating lusts? Or you guard yourself from the occult?

Let me make this really practical for you. This Christmas, what will you get in the mail – maybe fifty to seventy catalogs? Tell me, what goes on in your heart when you flip through a Christmas mail order catalog? Don't they just stimulate, especially in your particular area of interest, don't they stimulate covetousness and greed – the desire to accumulate more?

Jesus says, *Watch out! Be on your guard.*

I have very little interest in clothes catalogs. But I love looking through the mail order food catalogs. I look at the pictures and I think to myself, "Yeah...pears...that's what I need. I need 50 pears." Now, the truth is, I don't even really like pears that much. But they look so good in the pictures.

Maybe for you the hook is a car magazine or a home decorating magazines or catalogs. Multiply what you experience at Christmas by 10,000 times. What happens to your heart when you go shopping? We in Columbus have turned shopping into pure entertainment. What an incredibly perverse concept. Shopping as entertainment. What should we do with our free time? Shop. Look at stuff. Feel stuff. Handle stuff. Desire stuff. Buy stuff. Let's walk around Easton and just look. Let's go to an antique store and look. Let's go to a clothing store and look. Or to the Pottery Barn and look. Or to the computer store and just look.

Do you get it? Something goes on in your heart and in my heart when we pour over the catalogs, when we stare at the ads, when you use shopping as entertainment. You are not listening to Jesus.

It says, *Watch out! Be on guard against every form of greed.* Instead, we invite greed into the front door of our hearts. Extravagance becomes necessity. Excess becomes reasonable. Wants become needs. Greed becomes no big deal.

We have alarms for so much of our stuff. We have car alarms and house alarms. My car has an alarm for the CD player in it. We have office alarms and smoke alarms. Wouldn't it be a good idea to have an accumulations alarm? Just this annoying alarm that goes off - beeeeeeeeeee – stop spending; stop accumulating; - beeeeeeeeeee – no new shirt, no new sweater, no new computer, no new house decoration, no new piece of furniture, no new carpet, nothing.

What do you need? We need to listen to Jesus. He says to be on guard. Watch yourself.

Jesus goes on and says, *A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.* He is dealing with how we measure a person's worth. Every year magazines like Forbes prints articles about the net worth of the hundred wealthiest people in the world. We read about these billionaires and how much their worth. Bill Gates is worth three times as much as his nearest competitor.

Did you get what Jesus is saying here when he says that a person's life doesn't consist in the abundance of his possessions. He is saying measuring a person's worth by how much money they have is like measuring a person's worth by the color of their hair. Let's have an article each year about the hundred blondest people in America. Or measuring a person's worth by the size of the mole on their back. We can have an article about the hundred largest moles. We constantly measure people by externals – their homes, their cars, their occupations, their degrees, their looks.

A number of years ago a history student wrote a really interesting paper analyzing obituaries written in the Salem, Mass. paper from the 1780's through the 1990's. In the late 1700's and early 1800's, almost every single obituary mentioned the character of the deceased – the generosity, the honesty, the frugality of the deceased person. They would speak of an instance of great charity. Occasionally, the obituary would reference a negative character quality of the deceased.

By way of contrast, in the late 1700's and early 1800's, only 15% of the obituaries mentioned the person's occupation. By the 1900's virtually every single obituary mentioned an individual's occupation. See, 200 years ago they measured things the way Christ measures them. He said that your life, your worth as a human being is not about your externals – what you do, what you drive, what you eat, and what you wear.

Let me read to you a story. The other night at our congregational meeting, I read this story about someone that one of our ministries called Project Compassion, which is our church's ministry to people in the community who have AIDS and who are HIV positive. I want to read to you a story that I read the other night. Most of you were not at the Congregational Meeting. Listen to this.

**Story of Jack** – Jack had been a long time client of Project Compassion, over six years. He had a wonderful Faithful Friend, Tracey, who had befriended him in a one-on-one relationship for as many years. John was a “spiritual” guy, who was fascinated with angels and other spiritual things, but we knew he had not turned his entire life over to the Lord. He had a bad taste in his mouth with Christianity as his family were Christians and had rejected him because of his lifestyle. We prayed for his salvation continually. As Jack approached the last few months of his life and his health deteriorated, he insisted he was going to heaven, but we remained unsure. He attended church here at Vineyard when his health allowed it off and on. We continued to pray for an open door and for conviction of the Holy Spirit in his life. About a month before his death, Tracey and her husband Buddy, shared a small Christian tract, with Jack. He immediately was convicted and knew he had a decision to make. He bowed his head with them and accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Jack then took the tract and led his sister to the Lord. He had an urgent desire to be baptized, but was bedridden and sick, so we arranged for a baptism at his home and had his entire family around him. His family had been estranged from him, because of his homosexuality, but when they heard that he had come to Jesus, they started visiting him. I baptized Jack in his bed with his father, brother, sister-in-law and nieces as well as Tracey, his Faithful Friend around his bed. I explained about baptism and how Jack had accepted

Jesus as his Lord and Savior. As I poured the water over his head, all of us in the room experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit in the room, Vineyard worship music was playing in the background, and the peace of God was profound. Jack's one dying prayer was for reconciliation with his father. On the evening of his passing, his faithful friend, Tracey, myself, his father, brother and sister-in-law were with him bedside. We were able to hold his hands and calm his fear until the peace of God fell on him. He cried out for his father, and his elderly father reached out his hands and fell on his son's chest. A smile spread across Jack's face and they clung to one another, all forgiven, all at peace now. He died peacefully that evening having come to the Lord, making peace with his father and surrounded by those that loved him. Project Compassion did the funeral at the church in the chapel and had a gathering in the café afterwards for the family and friends. Some of Jack's friends wanted more information about Project Compassion and Jack's father hugged me and wanted to know more about Jesus! God had blessed so many through Jack's life.

How much was Jack's life worth? For a lot of folks, they would say, "Not much." Here's a gay man dying of AIDS. In God's sight, he was very precious.

You know, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "I Have A Dream" speech, says he was looking forward to a day when men and women would not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. That's what Jesus is saying here. Your life is not measured by the amount of stuff you accumulate, but by the content of your character. Have you trained yourself to get past the externals and measure people by their character?

Well here's the story he told in this parable. *The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'* Now here's the key phrase, *He thought to himself*. You can underline that phrase, *He thought to himself*, *'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'* Then he said, *"This is what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grains and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for years.'"*

How do you think about money? This man is entirely self-centered. The word "I" is mentioned six times and the word "my" is mentioned four times – I, my, me. We should also note that this person's thoughts about money are simply a monologue carried on in his own mind. He thinks to himself. Nowhere in his thoughts is there any mention of God, is there any inclusion of God.

Psalm 10:4 says about the wicked person, "In all of his thoughts, there is no room for God." Be honest; isn't that the way most of us think about accumulation and purchases. In all of our thoughts there is no room for God. See, the approach Jesus desires of people who supposedly have given their entire lives to him is not thinking to ourselves, "what shall I do with my money?" The approach of the Christian is "Lord, where do you want me to direct the money you have given me?" Friends, I tell you, it would be absolutely revolutionary to you if you before you pulled out your credit card or took out



your check book, you just simply asked the question, “Lord, is this where you want me to direct the money you’ve give me?”

The building campaign we had three years ago was so spiritually healthy for many of us here at the church who participated in it because it was a rare time that people in the church actually asked the question: what do you want me to do with what you’ve given me? I want to read to you a letter – I’ve gotten permission to do this – from someone who wrote me a couple of weeks ago:

*Dear Rich,*

*My husband and I just fulfilled our obligation to the building fund pledge and want to give glory to God for giving more to us than we gave to him. Over three years ago we asked the Lord what he wanted us to give towards the building fund. After praying separately, we came together and discovered that God spoke the same dollar amount to both of us. We thought we heard incorrectly, because the amount the Lord laid on our hearts was beyond our capability; we couldn’t even send in the initial payment at that amount! We didn’t want to make a vow to the Lord that we couldn’t keep, so we received prayer and counsel from other church leaders.*

*The Lord remained faithful to us through the whole process and spoke reassuring words. While a friend was praying with me, she saw me standing next to a barn overflowing with hay, doors wide open. She believed that God was going to give a financial blessing that we were going to use to help others. God revealed to my husband that He was going to use the building fund pledge process to lift Jesus into the leadership of our marriage, to encourage my husband to lead me, and to teach me how to trust in His provision. The Lord told my husband how he was going to bless us financially over the next three years, and it was up to him to lead us in obedience to the pledge.*

*The word that the Lord spoke over three years ago has come to pass. In addition to reaching the pledge amount that God spoke to us, we were able to tithe and bless other with financial gifts. Jesus is exalted in our marriage and finances, and I have a deeper level of trust in his provision. My husband has learned how to lead in our marriage.*

*Over the past three years we thought we were giving to God, but as we look back we were always receiving his blessings. “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.*

What a model for all of us about the way to think about money. Not what shall I do with my money- but what do you want us to give? And God released blessing along with his direction. That’s always the way it is with God. Friends, let me ask you a personal question. DO you frequently find yourself asking God what do you want me to give and

wait for him to answer? Do you frequently say to God – Lord, how shall I direct the money you have given me?

How do you think about your money? In your thoughts about accumulation, is there any room for God?

Let me make one special note here. We are not talking about here today is productivity. Jesus is not condemning this man because he was productive – because he worked hard and his land was productive. And there is no condemnation implied by anything I'm staying today for any of you who are highly productive people. You work hard and the ground is coming up with an abundant harvest. There is absolutely no sin in being wildly productive. I want to be a productive, fruitful person – a person who bears abundant fruit. And your ability to produce wealth, especially if you have great ability, is not under attack by me or by this text today. Praise God is you are extremely productive. The question is what are you going to do with the fruit of your productivity?

But the text is asking, "How much do you think you need?" It is interesting. This man is productive. He is so productive that he's run out of room to store his crops. And one of the real warning signs that you are in spiritual danger, that greed has taken over your life, is you have storage problems. You just don't have the room for all of your stuff.

It is interesting to me that more and more companies are getting into the storage business as we Americans are so productive that we've gone way beyond meeting our own needs and if we are going to keep for ourselves all that we produce, then we need more space to store it in. How many of you have storage problems in your closets? How many of you have redesigned your closets with new shelving, a double rod? Maybe you have a storage shed out back. 2500 square feet is not sufficient to hold your stuff.

Any time you find a person who is very productive and they decide that they are going to keep the fruit of their productivity, they are going to have storage issues. How much do you think you need?

You know, I say this with all affection, but I believe we Americans relate to things the way that alcoholics relate to booze. There is simply no comprehension of how excessive the consumption is. You ask an alcoholic, "How much did you drink?" They say, "I really didn't drink that much, actually, this evening. I think I've had six or seven beers. I've really not drunk that much at all."

That's the way we are with our stuff. Let me just illustrate it with a popular magazine that's out. It's called "Real Simple."

What do Americans consider to be the real simple tastes? Are we talking about heating with wood, a 900 square foot house, 1988 Chevy Cavalier? What are we talking about when we say "real simple?"

Well, here's an ad. We have the real simple Mercedes Benz SL500 with a 302 HP V8 that can hyperspace from 0-60 in 6.1 seconds. Next to it, of course, is the sleek, real simple CLK 430 Coupe with supersonic thrills and a 6-speed transmission. That's simplicity.

Let's turn the page. Here we have some real simple American Express gift checks in 50 and 100 dollar denominations.

This is simplicity. Here are four strands of pearls. You have maybe six feet of pearls here. But they're simple.

Here's a simple woman's stomach.

Here's a simple Nissan.

This is simplicity. Here's a simple little diamond from DeBeers around this woman's neck.

A little later we see them marketing real simple table settings with real simple \$80 plates.

Here's a fifth thing. What are your plans for the future? This man said, *And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry."*

Greed expresses itself not just in our present consumption, but in our plans for the future. For many Americans, retirement is just another opportunity for us to express self-indulgence. Here's an article from a local paper. It begins this way:

*For Joe and Eunice Mackelear, traveling never grows old. By land, sea and air, the retired great-grandparents have visited just about every place on their wish list of destinations. Retirement has its perks. Together, the Atlanta couple are enjoying their great adventures by traveling all over the world to exotic destinations.*

This one tourist company says, *Mature vacationers look for the five f's: first class, food, fun, facts, and foreign.*

Let me read to you an advertisement from a retirement community. The advertisement says, *If you want more from life than just retirement, Crane Lakes is your kind of community. Everything about this new 55+ community from year round recreation to a gated entry, to our high quality homes, is dedicated to living life in the fullest. As a Crane Lake's homeowner, you will be eligible for membership at our private 18-hole golf course. We have a 19,000 sq. ft. community club house, a grand banquet hall, two swimming pools, outdoor whirlpools, clay court tennis, library, arts and crafts center, etc. etc. More convenience, more fun, more home value. It all adds up to more out of life. The Good Life is waiting for you at Crane Lakes Golf and Country Club.*

Retirement as another opportunity to express self-indulgence. Well Christianity is not exactly about the good life, it is about the surrendered life. The good life is not waiting for you, the holy life, the devoted life, a life of helping and encouraging. Let me give you an alternative. How about retirement as the freedom to spend more time serving people without the additional burden of having to work. Let me share with you what a few of our retired people are doing with their time.

John and Lois Myer – A lot of you have been impacted by their lives. John worked as a personnel manager at Nationwide Insurance for thirty four years. The Myers started to attend here back in 1989. John and Lois were serving in various ministries before retirement, but they started our first food pantry that we call Fruit of the Vine down in the Short North. They led the ministry for the first few years of its existence. Then a church member approached John and Lois about how to keep the fires burning in marriage. And they decided in 1997 to turn the attention of their ministry toward our marriage and family ministry. John has served on our Vineyard Leadership Institute Task Force, written the admissions manual. He interviews applicants, grades papers. Lois has led and mentored many women's group leaders. She works as a peer counselor in ministry. These are full time workers.

Here's another couple – John and Vera Hassle. Vera worked in women's ministry and then came back to work in children's ministry. She comes to the church and counts money every Monday. They've opened up their home to two women's groups, and a men's group. They used to host Joshua House leaders once a month. John and Vera mentor married couples. Vera writes, "I love being able to devote my time to serving the Lord. Sometimes the things I do are mundane and I wonder what help I'm really being, but God lets me know that no matter what I think, everything I do is for his glory. God is so good. He enriches my life every day." Vera's husband, John, works with our computer staff. He helps maintain our desk top computers and our network and helps with a wide variety of administrative tasks. It is common to walk into our church on any given day and see John and Vera working somewhere in the church.

Or consider Sybil Thompson who is one of our most productive peer counselors. She has done more kingdom activity from age 60-70 than most Christians do in a lifetime.

Retirement as an opportunity to serve. How do you think about your future?

Well, this guy engaged in terrible estate planning. He thought he was preparing for the future, but he died before he was able to indulge his appetites. Jesus concludes the story by saying, *This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.*

The whole point of everything Jesus is saying is you can live the self-indulgent life in which all that you produce is consumed by you and by your family and is hoarded up for your future or you can live the giving life and be rich towards God.

Let me ask you a question: Do you consider yourself rich toward God in the way you handle your finances? Where are you at? Are you extravagant toward yourself and stingy toward God or are you extravagant toward God and you are watching out, guarding your heart, concerning yourself? Here's an easy way to figure out whether you are rich toward God? Look at your tax returns. What percentage of your income goes to the work of expanding the kingdom of God?

Let me close with a couple of stories. We have a teen ministry here and an after school ministry. One of the boys from the neighborhood, who I'm going to call Jim, got involved with our youth group. Let me read this to you. It's from our Teen Pastor, Jeff Augustine.

*This year we were delighted to see one of our boys, (I'll call him Jim), a former gang member accept the Lord. He got baptized and he continues to walk out his faith. In the time since, he's been an effective witness to his friends. He has brought many of his gang members to church, many of which have also accepted Jesus. We started a small group which met during our Godspeed, which is our Teen Ministry on Monday nights. The group was specifically formed as a specialty group for these particular teens.*

*During one meeting in particular, more than twenty gang members attended the small group. That night several accepted Jesus. Jim got a job at Hooters as a cook and bouncer. During break time one day, he was reading his Bible at work and some of the waitresses asked him what he was reading. When he told them, they replied, "Well, I can't understand the Bible." So Jim went out and bought all the waitresses a copy of The Message (Gene Peterson's version of the Bible) and he continues to challenge them to read it.*

*He also got the WOW award at Westerville South High School. This is a student award nominated by teachers for the most improved behavior. Also, one of the guys from the specialty group accepted the Lord and was baptized and worked at the church during the summer. He continues to work outside the church so that he can support his family since his father is out of work.*

Let me put this right down at street level for you, as I finish up today. We know that the government doesn't have any answers for life transformation. The best that government can do is hand out a check, but it can't change people's lives. They can't turn someone like this kid, Jim, into a responsible citizen – a hardworking, respectful young adult or a responsible husband and father. The government can't do that.

We know the one institution in our society that can transform people like Jim's lives – that's the church. Do you realize that if every person who regularly attends this church simply tithed on their gross income; I'm not talking about something extravagant, I'm talking about tithing on your gross income, the church's income would more than double. We would go from about a \$6 million dollar budget to about a \$14 million dollar budget.

Right across our north parking lot, we have a low income housing project. We have government supported housing just to the southwest of us. We talk about racial reconciliation in this church. Here's a way to make racial reconciliation practical. What if we expanded our after school program so that we ran an after school program for 150-200 children and teenagers every day after school and on Saturdays and we hired fifteen college students who go to this church away from Starbucks to run the program? The church could hire fifteen young adults today, if we had the money.

What's the alternative to us doing an after school program or expanding our youth work? What's the alternative? Well, one alternative is the kids in the neighborhood lives aren't transformed by the power of Christ and in five years one of them mugs you or steals your car or they assault one of your kids at school. Or they get into drugs and we build more prison space and we warehouse them and complain about the crime problem and high taxes to deal with drug abuse and robbers.

Friends, at the root of so many of our social problems is nothing other than our simple greed. We buy more than we need so we have storage problems. We consume excessively and we teach our kids to consume excessively. The only way to break the power of money in your life is to give it away. Just throw the Christmas catalogs into the garbage. Reject shopping as entertainment. Say to yourself, "We've got enough." Recognize there is a danger to your soul. See that you aren't living the full life you can live because your stuff is building a barrier between you and God. The only way to break the power of money is to increase your giving. Prayer, resolutions, reading, won't do it. Increase your giving and you will decrease your greed.

Let me close with this article the Dispatch ran last Monday. *A businessman who is leading a fund raising effort for Middletown Christian School's building fund has chipped in a dollar. But this isn't any ordinary dollar, it is a rare coin known as the "king of coins" and is expected to raise thousands, perhaps millions of dollars, for the school. Bidding will start at \$500,000 when the 1804 dollar goes up for auction in Baltimore. There are only 14 others like it in America. It is one of the classic US coins, said William Gibbs, Editor of Coin World Weekly Magazine based in Sydney. Philip Flanagan has spent a lifetime building a complete collection of US Silver Dollars. He is auctioning off the whole thing to benefit Grace Baptist Church in the city midway between Cincinnati and Dayton. Flanagan, president of the Foundation for Raising Money for the School Expansion said he originally started collecting to finance his retirement.*

Here's the closing quote: *Flanagan said, "I've decided to take a different direction with my assets. It's time for me to take my assets, liquidate them, and put them to work for Christ.*

What about you? When are you going to start guarding yourself and your family from the specific threat of greed? Will you begin to ask the Lord how he wants you to direct the money he has given you? Please stand. Let's pray.

## **The World's Greatest Threat to Your Spiritual Health**

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Rich Nathan

December 1-2, 2001

Renewing Your Spiritual Passion Series

Luke 12:13-22

### **I. Missing the Threat (1 Timothy 6:9, 10)**

### **II. Assessing the Threat**

- A. Are you on guard against greed? (Luke 12:15)
- B. How do you measure a person's worth? (Luke 12:15)
- C. How do you think about money? (Luke 12:16-17)
- D. How much do you think you need? (Luke 12:18)
- E. What are your plans for the future? (Luke 12:19, 20)
- F. Are you rich toward God? (Luke 12:21)