

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

July 31, 2022 – PENTECOST 8/PROPER 13, YR. C.

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Only What’s Done for Christ Will Last*”*

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23 (The Teacher decides all worldly things are in vain)
Psalm 49:1-11 (We can never ransom ourselves and death comes to all alike)
Colossians 3:1-11 (Raised with Christ, we are to focus on what is heavenly)
St. Luke 12:13-21 (Jesus cautions against storing up treasure on earth, rather than riches with God)

This morning, *every single one* of our four Scripture lessons addresses the value we place on earthly goods. And for some of us, our priorities are misplaced, similar to the character in a well-known skit by the late Jack Benny. He’s walking down a street when suddenly he’s approached by an armed robber: “Your money, or your life!” There follows a *long* pause. Jack makes no response. Finally the impatient robber demands: “Well?” Jack answers: “Don’t rush me—I’m thinking it over.”

As we unpack today’s Gospel, let’s listen to what Jesus has to say to us about money, possessions, and our lives. The background for this story is an incident that occurred in Galilee as Jesus was teaching amidst a large crowd. A young man called out from the crowd, “Rabbi, tell my brother to divide our father’s inheritance.” Jewish law prescribed that upon the father’s death, the elder son received two-thirds of the inheritance, while the younger son received one-third. And often, rabbis were called upon to adjudicate such matters when these were in dispute.¹

Obviously, this is the *younger* son who’s complaining about the inherent unfairness of the law. As some of us are aware, few things can divide siblings faster than the process of divvying up a parent’s estate. It seems human nature was much the same in Jesus’ time. However, Our Lord refuses to get involved in this petty family squabble. Rather, He is more concerned about the young man’s preoccupation with the things of this world. Jesus warns, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

The automobile innovator Henry Ford once asked an associate about his life goals. The man replied his goal was to make a million dollars. A few days later Ford gave the man a pair of glasses made out of two silver dollars. He told the man to put them on and asked what he could see. “Nothing,” the man said. “The dollars are in the way.” Ford told the man he wanted to teach him a lesson: If his only goal was dollars, he would miss a host of greater opportunities. He should invest himself in serving others, not simply in making money.² He was, in the words of the famous 19th-century Pastor, Harry Emerson Fosdick, “rich in things and poor in soul.”³

Jesus warns us that rather than storing up treasures on earth, we should be rich toward God. Well, we know about hoarding *stuff*, but what exactly does it mean to be ‘rich toward God?’ Racking up points in heaven? That sounds like a ‘salvation by works’ or merit theology, not salvation by *faith*. Being rich toward God simply means *placing the highest value* on godly priorities, and then aiming to live our lives around those. Because godly priorities—such as faith, hope, love, charity, forgiveness, and sacrifice—will always be intangibles, things we can’t physically touch or store up, we have to choose to live these ways each new day.

Forbes Magazine’s 2022 listing of the United States’ richest people includes Elon Musk of Tesla and SpaceX (\$219 billion); Amazon’s Jeff Bezos (\$171 billion); Microsoft’s Bill Gates (\$129 billion) and financier Warren Buffett (\$118 billion).⁴ How much do you think they will have when they die? The answer is, of course, nothing. Nada, zero, zilch. We come into the world with nothing, and leave it the same way.

“You’ll never see a U-Haul behind a hearse,” the actress Cicely Tyson wrote in her 2021 autobiography. “I don’t care how much money you have or what level of notoriety you’ve achieved, you can’t take any of it with you. There is a cap on earthly success, a ceiling on the amount of joy that possessions and awards can bring before disillusionment sets in.

Our appearance, our prosperity, the applause: all of it is so fleeting. But a life of true significance has unlimited impact. It is measured in how well we’ve loved those around us, how much we’ve given away, how many seeds we’ve sown along our path.”⁵

In Psalm 24:1 (NCV), we read, “The earth belongs to the Lord, and everything in it—the world and all its people.” So, if *everything* belongs to God, then what are we to do with our possessions? Give them all away, and live with nothing? No. I don’t believe the Lord wants any of us to do without what we require to survive, flourish, and be nurtured in this life—or to have enough to be able to give to those whose need is greater than ours.

However, we are to hold all things—including our family, friends, and loved-ones—lightly, not grasping any of them too tightly. That’s because, by God’s design, we are to keep the world, and all that is in it, in trust for the One to whom it truly belongs, God alone. In fact, all that we have—our very next breath, as well as the loved-ones in our lives—is on loan to us from our generous and loving Heavenly Father. Believing that nothing actually belongs to us is the first step toward freedom from being *possessed* by our possessions.

The second step is to replace things—money, property, status—as major priorities in our lives with the Christ-like virtues and spiritual practices to which St. Paul calls us in today’s lesson from Colossians (3:12-17). He writes: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

No matter what people sentimentally pack into our coffins—sports mementoes, teddy bears, jewelry, etc.—we won’t be able to take *anything* with us into eternity. Not our money, our houses, our clothes, cars, academic degrees, professional credentials, or favorite toys. Along with our soul, the only thing that will endure is well-described in a poem by Charles Studd, an early 20th-century British missionary to China⁶:

“Two little lines I heard one day, Traveling along life’s busy way;
Bringing conviction to my heart, And from my mind would not depart;

Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last.

Only one life, yes only one, Soon will its fleeting hours be done;
Then, in ‘that day’ my Lord to meet, And stand before His Judgment seat;

Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last.

Only one life, the still small voice, Gently pleads for a better choice
Bidding me selfish aims to leave, And to God’s holy will to cleave;

Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last.

Only one life, a few brief years, Each with its burdens, hopes, and fears;

Each with its clays I must fulfill, living for self or in His will;

Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last.

In closing, I’ve adapted Studd’s last four verses as a prayer for us:

“When this bright world would tempt us sore, When Satan would a victory score; When self would seek to have its way, Then help us Lord with joy to say; Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last. Give us Father, a purpose deep, In joy or sorrow Thy word to keep; Faithful and true what e’er the strife, Pleasing Thee in our daily life; Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last. Oh let our love with fervor burn, And from the world now let us turn; Living for Thee, and Thee alone, Bringing Thee pleasure on Thy throne; Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last. Only one life, yes only one, Now let us say, ‘Thy will be done’; And when at last we hear the call, We know we’ll say ‘twas worth it all’; Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last.”⁷ *Amen!*

⁶ Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 4 August 2013, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

⁷ Adapt. Brett Blair, “Building Barns, Postponing Life” [Sermons.com](https://sermons.com/sermon/building-barns-postponing-life/1339145/) <<https://sermons.com/sermon/building-barns-postponing-life/1339145/>> 23 July 2022. Used with permission.

⁸ “Service and Henry Ford,” [FaithLifeSermons](https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/25829-service-and-henry-ford/) 2007 <<https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/25829-service-and-henry-ford/>> 23 July 2022. Used with permission.

⁹ Part of the words to verse 4 in “God of Grace and God of Glory,” Hymn #594, [The Hymnal 1982](https://www.hymnary.org/hymnal/1982) (New York, Church Publishing).

¹⁰ Richard Mille, “Forbes World’s Billionaire List: The Richest in 2022,” [Forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/) <<https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>> 25 July 2022.

¹¹ Cicely Tyson, [Just as I Am](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6917619.Cicely_Tyson), (New York, Harper Collins, 2021) <https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6917619.Cicely_Tyson> 23 July 2022.

¹² Charles Studd, [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Studd), 24 March 2022 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Studd> 23 July 2022.

¹³ C. T. Studd, “Only One Life, ’Twill Soon Be Past,” [Reasons for Hope](https://reasonsforhopejesus.com/only-one-life-twill-soon-be-past-by-c-t-studd-1860-1931/), 29 December 2021 <<https://reasonsforhopejesus.com/only-one-life-twill-soon-be-past-by-c-t-studd-1860-1931/>> 23 July 2022.