

What Life is Not About

Well, so good to see you guys. If you have a bible, turn with me to Luke 12. Hope you all had a great Thanksgiving, complete with turkey and stuffing and drool naps and all the other necessary parts of any good holiday. It was definitely somewhat of a bizarre Thanksgiving for me. Most of you guys know that a little over a week and a half ago we suddenly and unexpectedly lost a very important member of our church family. So in some ways, I went into Thanksgiving still reeling from that and everything surrounding it. But at the same time it was really good for me because it really made me all the more aware of everything I have to be thankful for. I held my wife and my son Whit a little tighter, was a little less distracted with all the little unimportant things, and got to really focus in on the things I've been given. So it was a very different but very good Thanksgiving for me and my family.

But today as we kick off this new series called *Give Like God*, I wanted to begin by talking for just a few about what happened the *day after* Thanksgiving. I'd like for us to talk for just a little while about the phenomenon that is *Black Friday*. So first, just for fun, let's take a look at a few of the best Black Friday clips.

[Show several clips with sound off, to comment on them]

Now, my guess is that even if you *went* Black Friday shopping, most of you didn't do things like the things we just watched on those video clips. At least I hope not. If you did, we want you to know there's grace for you here. *Part* of that grace may need to look like us getting you some serious help—but still, there's grace for you. But I show you those videos one, because they're nothing short of amazing to watch. But also because I think it becomes obvious from those videos that we have a bit of a *cultural problem*. **Large numbers of people in our society have such a desire for stuff, for material things—that large cross-sections of them are willing to trample people, cuss at people, grab people by the pants, or at the very least wake up at *ungodly* hours in the morning to buy more stuff at a discounted rate.**

Now here's what's even *more* fascinating to me. If you had no context for what Black Friday was at all, I really think you would assume these people's lives *depended* on whatever they were at that store to get, right? You would think there was some type of food shortage in our country and these people are fighting for their lives. These videos resemble a mob fighting for the last scraps of food. Like if you've ever seen a zombie or apocalypse-type movie where people are rummaging through a grocery store to stockpile food for their family, it looks shockingly similar to a lot of these videos we just watched. But here's the thing: *that's not what's happening, at all*. These people aren't fighting for *survival*. These people aren't trampling over one another to get food to feed their family. They're not fighting over the essentials of life. In all these videos, people are fighting each other over *things that they don't need*. They're fighting over toys, iPads, flat-screen TVs...over *freaking fidget spinners*.

So think about this: this past Thursday, most of us set aside a day for *thankfulness* to happen. We took the time to be thankful for everything we have. And then, **we rounded out that *same holiday* by waking up insanely early on Friday morning to go out and ruin our morning obsessing over things we *don't* have**. I don't think it's any coincidence that Thanksgiving and Black Friday happen right next to each other. Sure, there's the obvious, surface-level reason that a lot of people have off work on

that Friday. But I think there's actually something deeper going on. I think there's something in the American psyche where many of us have a hard time just being thankful for what we *have*. **I think we have a lot of difficulty being thankful for the things we *do have* for very long without going out and buying all the things we *don't*.**

And whether it's on Black Friday or not, we as a society are very quick to spend massive amounts of money we don't have on things we don't need. The average American carries \$38,000 in personal debt, *not including* home mortgages. Another stat that really stuck out to me, especially because of the relatively young age of *our* church, was this: among *millenials*, 41% of our income on average goes towards *discretionary* costs. In other words, things we don't *need*. Things like dining out, nightlife, and personal passions and hobbies. **By in large, we are spending money we don't have, on things we don't need.** And it's taking a *toll* on us: money and finances continues to top the list of the leading causes of stress for Americans.¹ So we have some issues when it comes to money.

And so **part of what I want to do in this series we're starting today is speak into how we think about our money and possessions as followers of Jesus.** If we claim to follow Jesus, how should we think about and use our money? Jesus actually has a *surprising amount* to say about money and possessions. He talks about money and possessions more than *any other topic* in the gospels, except for the kingdom of God. So Jesus apparently has a lot to say on the subject. How we think about our money and possessions was apparently a very important, pressing issue to him.

So today, I want us to take a look at one time Jesus talks about money and possessions. Look with me at Luke 12, starting in v. 13:

[13] Someone in the crowd said to him [him being Jesus], "Teacher, [tell this man to hand over the discounted iPad to me, because I got here first. No, but it is similar. He says,] tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

Now, think about this situation for a second: Jesus is sort of this subversive, indie, itinerant teacher making his way through towns in the ancient world. He's healing people, he's casting out demons, he's performing miracles, he's bringing people back from the dead. Now, imagine how *obsessed with money* you would have to be to approach a guy doing those types of things like that and say, "hey Jesus, it's an absolute honor to meet you—love everything you're doing with the place. I wanted to see if maybe you could take a little time off from your miracle and speaking tour here and come tell my brother to divide an inheritance with me." I think there's some clues there into just how *fixated* on money and stuff this guy is. So take a look at Jesus' response, v. 14:

[14] But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?"

In other words, "that is not what I'm here to do." "You have radically misunderstood what my purpose on earth is." And then v. 15:

[15] And he said to them—

¹ Above data is all from Northwestern's 2018 Planning & Progress study. <https://news.northwesternmutual.com/planning-and-progress-2018>

If you read through the gospels much, you know you have to be so very careful when asking Jesus a question, because chances are, he's gonna turn it around on you somehow. And sure enough in *this story*, he does just that. Take a look at the rest of v. 15:

“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

“Be on your guard against *covetousness*.” Now, that word might feel a little foreign to us. It can be translated “covetousness” or “greed,” or maybe even in our culture today, something like “materialism.” Most literally translated, it's the “never-satisfied desire for more.” That's **what Jesus wants his people to be on guard against: the never-satisfied desire for more money and more stuff.** And then Jesus gives us the reason *for* that. The reason is because “...*one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*” **Jesus, referring to money and possessions, says “this is precisely what life is not about.”** Money and possessions is not what life is all about. It's easy to miss, but **that right there might be one of the most counter-cultural things the bible has to say to 21st century Americans.** That life is *not about* how much stuff you have.

Now nearly all of us (or at least those of us that follow Jesus) would hear that and go “well yeah—*of course* life is not about how much stuff you have. Who would believe something silly like that?” We have no problem with a statement like Jesus makes at a *philosophical* level. But when we get a little more *practical* with it, I think it becomes quite revealing. Here's what I mean. I want you to imagine for a second making the same exact salary you make *right now*, for the *rest of your life*. Next, I want you to imagine *never* living in a bigger or nicer house or apartment than *the one you currently live in*, for the rest of your life. Or maybe a little *more personal* for some of us in the room: I want you to imagine using the same model iPhone you use right now for the rest of your life. How would you say those scenarios make you feel? Just gut-level reaction. Not great, right?

Now, hear me clearly: I'm *not* saying it is wrong or sinful to take a raise. I'm not saying it's wrong or sinful to ever move into a bigger or nicer house. I'm not saying it's wrong or sinful to get the next iPhone to come out. But I want you to pay very close attention to the *discomfort* you felt when you imagined *not* being able to do any of those things, even for just a second. Did you *feel* that? That discomfort right there, I would argue, is the degree to which we all believe that “*life consists in the abundance of our possessions.*” If we didn't believe, at least a little, that life consisted in the abundance of our possessions, those thoughts wouldn't make us uncomfortable at all. So that's it. *That's* what Jesus is talking about here. So we might not have a problem with what he says at a *philosophical* level. But I think an awful lot of us are very uncomfortable with it at a *practical* level.

Jesus goes on, v. 16:

[16] And he told them a parable, saying,

So Jesus is about to launch into a “parable,” or a story that illustrates what he has just said about money and possessions. Picking it back up in v. 16:

*“The **land of a rich man produced plentifully**, [17] and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’*

So it’s important to know that **in Jesus’ day and age, land and crops equaled money**. If you had land and that land produced crops, that meant you were in good shape financially. So when it says that this guy’s land “produced *plentifully*,” you could read that as “he had a good year financially.” His stock portfolio took off, he got a killer Christmas bonus, he got an amazing unexpected tax refund—you name it. The point is that somehow, he made out way better this particular year than he thought he would. And the question he asks is “*what should I do with all this extra?* I’ve got way more than I need, so what should I do with it?”

Take a look at his solution, v. 18:

*[18] And he said, ‘I will do **this**: I will tear down my barns and build **larger ones**, and **there** I will **store** all my grain and my goods.*

He does with *his* extra stuff what any good *American* would do with theirs: he puts it in a storage unit. “*Surely*,” he thinks, “*God wouldn’t want me to have **less** stuff—he’d want me to have **more***. So the only way to solve that problem is to build bigger barns to store all my extra up for myself.” So that’s what he does. And then as a result, v. 19:

*[19] And I will say to my soul, “**Soul**, you have **ample goods laid up for many years**; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”*

He’s *set* now. Doesn’t have to worry about where next year’s paycheck is going to come from, he’s golden. He’s squared away. No need to worry about anything at all. Now, right here we’ve gotta talk. Because here in America, we’ve almost turned this mindset into a *sport*. So many of us view money very similarly to this guy. Take this guy out of the pages of the bible and is he not just an embodiment of the American dream? I mean isn’t this what most *all of us* want to be able to do? Have a few good years, put some money away, retire early, and then do whatever we want with the rest of our life? At his core, he just wants to become financially independent. That’s what *most of us* want. **This guy in the story looks an awful lot like an awful lot of us**. And yet, at the same time, here’s what Jesus says about him. And as a warning, it’s not pretty—v. 20:

Take a look at v. 20:

*[20] But God said to him, ‘Fool! **This night your soul is required of you**, and the things you have prepared, **whose will they be?**’ [21] So is **the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.**”*

And here’s the point God brings up with this man in the story: *if tonight your life ends, who will all your stuff belong to?* Certainly not *you*. If there’s one thing I’ve thought about a lot over the past couple weeks since Sean passed away, it’s the *fragility* of life. It’s that **no matter how young you are, no matter how far you think you are from death, none of us actually know when it will come for us**. I know that is far from a chipper Christmas series-type sermon, but it bears saying. And for all our advances in technology, nobody gets to take anything with them to the grave. **Every bit of it will go to**

somebody else.

And so here's what Jesus is trying to communicate to this man. He's showing him that **everybody gives away their money and possessions at some point—it's just a matter of how and of when**. So you can be generous now, *voluntarily*, or you can wait until you die, and then be "generous" *accidentally*. **One way or another, all of your stuff will eventually belong to someone else**. The only thing *you* get to determine is whether you're going to get to participate in the joy of giving it *willingly* or not. I realize to many of us that seems like a crude way of putting it, but Jesus is saying that's how the world works.

And then, with that point made, Jesus just ends the story. No resolution, no change of heart, no pretty bow at the end of the story—just a haunting story and a, "so which one is it gonna be?" I don't think many people would've liked Jesus' style of story-telling if he was around today. Disney sure wouldn't buy the rights to many of his stories. His stories usually don't leave you all warm and fuzzy afterwards. So **Jesus just leaves us with this story as a way of illustrating that "life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions."** As a way of showing us that money and possessions are precisely *not* what life is all about.

But here's why we believe that life *is* about that: deep down, **I think we are discontent with what we have, because we're discontent with who we are**. And there is part of us that believes that buying and having more stuff will fix that. That it will alleviate, even if only for a second, what we currently don't like about ourselves. Or bare minimum, it will give us something like a fresh coat of paint on all the things we don't like about us. And let's be clear, it can often feel like it works that way. I think most of us would agree, buying new stuff *feels* good. "Retail therapy" is a common expression for a *reason*. I think many of us believe, deep down, that part of us needs to be made new and that new stuff will accomplish that. And Jesus would say to that: right *diagnosis*, wrong *solution*. **We are correct in discerning that we need to be made new—we are wrong in thinking that money and possessions will accomplish that. Only Jesus makes us new. Only he can give life. Money and possessions, at best, are a cheap substitute**. And that's what Jesus wants us to take away from this story.

And how he wants us to *respond* practically is this: **that we should "take care, and be on [our] guard against all covetousness."** Against greed. Against materialism. That we wouldn't "store up treasure for ourselves," and instead "be rich towards God." So let's talk: what does that look like practically? What does it look like to be on our guard against greed and materialism, because life isn't about how much money and stuff I have? I've got two everyday-type applications for us, and then one very specific application for our church family at the end. But we'll start with the everyday applications. **Being on your guard against greed looks like...**

1. Making and keeping a budget.

When Jesus says to "be on our guard" against greed, the language he uses is vivid: it means literally to *keep an eye on*. The word has two primary uses in the bible: one is when it talks about *shepherds keeping watch over their flocks*. So the Christmas story that we all start reading this time of year that talks about shepherds keeping watch by night—that's the same idea as we read here. The other use in the bible is in a military context. So it refers to a person who is stationed as patrol at night outside the city gates to ensure that no one comes to attack. In the same way, each of us should "keep watch" on ourselves when it comes to money and possessions. That's the imagery Jesus invokes for how we

should think about all of that. The implication is that **if you are not regularly taking steps *against* greed, that you are probably giving *into* it.**

Another way to say that is that **if you're not at least regularly monitoring where your money is going, I can almost guarantee it's mostly going towards materialism.** So practically speaking, if you don't have a current, detailed, up-to-date budget, I would suggest making one. **Having some sort of system for telling your money where to go and where not to go is the first line of defense against materialism and greed.** If you need help knowing where to start, talk to your LifeGroup leader or shoot me or Jeff an email—any of us would love to give you some resources to get started, but as soon as you can, start working on having and keeping a budget.

And if you wanna be even *more vigilant* in your resistance of materialism, once you *make* your budget, go over it with somebody in your LifeGroup who doesn't struggle as much with materialism as you do. Have them comb through it and point out any places where you might not be thinking about it well. Get other people to speak into where your money goes. **One way or another, have a plan to use budgeting to “keep an eye on” materialism and greed in your life.**

2. Giving 10% of your income away as a starting point.

I would encourage anyone who is a follower of Jesus to give away 10% of their income, *minimum*. The biblical word for that is *tithing*. Now followers of Jesus through the years have disagreed as to whether the principle of the tithe is an Old Testament idea only, or if it carries through to today. I'll let the real theologians duke that out.

But here's what is *abundantly clear* to me from the Scriptures: **you will not find very many patterns of God's people giving less than a tenth of their income away.** In the Old Testament, God's people really gave more like 30-40% of their income away *total*. And in the *New Testament*, people are generous all the way to the point of selling their possessions so that they can give *more generously*. **When you take an honest look through the bible, 10% is honestly on the extreme low side of the spectrum when it comes to what God's people give away.** So I feel totally comfortable saying that if you're a follower of Jesus, and you're not giving away at least 10% of your income, something needs to change.

I don't say that to shame you, or to make you feel guilty, I just say that as another follower of Jesus trying to encourage you to “be on your guard” against greed. So if you're here and you or your family just hit a tough season—somebody lost a job, or a huge unexpected expense just came out of left field and is taking a toll, something like that—please feel free to pause that conversation while you get on your feet financially—I want you to know that's okay. And if that's you—if you're in financial need and your a part of our church family—please make sure your LifeGroup knows about it, that people in our church know about it—because if we can, we want to help with that. So there may be seasons where 10% just isn't feasible. **But if you look back over your time as a follower of Jesus, and you've never consistently given at least 10% of our income away, that's not a season-of-life problem.** That's *likely* a problem of believing that “life consists in the abundance of our possessions.” I think in that case, there are probably some habits and mindsets that need to be adjusted in regards to money.

If you're a City Church member, we ask that you *start* with giving that 10% towards our church family here in Knoxville. Hopefully that is not the *only* way you're being generous, but if you're a member we just ask that you *start* there. We see the local church as being on the frontlines of meeting needs within our church family and out in our city. So we ask that if you're gonna start somewhere with generosity, you start there.

If you're *not* a City Church member, pick somewhere. A local church, a local non-profit, a person or family you know is in need, some combination of all of those. Just find something to give to that doesn't directly benefit you personally. Somewhere that doesn't directly benefit your *own* kingdom, but rather God's kingdom. One way or another, give away at least 10% of your income to something outside of yourself or your family.

[Give Knoxville]

Lastly, I'd love to give you one very specific way that you might guard against greed and materialism this season. Another holiday that has been infiltrated by the never-satisfied desire for more, just like Thanksgiving has, is *Christmas*. So when we think about Christmas, what are some of the first things we associate it with in our minds? *Gifts*, right? Like I don't know about you, but when I think about Christmas, I most quickly picture in my mind's eye sitting in my parents' living room, opening presents and getting excited about everything that I got for Christmas. I think of opening packages.

Now that for us as followers of Jesus is a bit odd. Because the very first Christmas wasn't about about receiving at all—it was about *giving*. It was about God giving of *himself* to humanity. It was about God's incredible generosity towards all of us. So as followers of Jesus, we're in this weird place of trying to remember and celebrate the *generosity* of God, while figuring out how to ward off the constant pull towards utter materialism around Christmas time.

As one effort in that direction, we launched something a couple weeks ago called *Give Knoxville*. Basically, with the help of two other churches in our area, we are hoping to provide Christmas presents to every foster child and foster family in DCS care across all of Knox County. We're accomplishing that through an online store at giveknoxville.com. There, you can find specific wish list requests from all of these kids, and purchase as many as you want. So our whole church is already participating in that.

But today, as a direct application of this teaching on materialism and being on guard against it, I want to propose something that may come off as a bit radical: what if this Christmas, you *donated* your *own* Christmas wish list to *Give Knoxville*? What if, instead of sending your family your Amazon wish list, or links to things you'd like to get this Christmas, what if you just sent them a link to giveknoxville.com and said "this year, this is my wishlist"? What if you just said, "you know what, this Christmas, I'd actually love for you buy something off these kids' wish lists, rather than something for me off of mine"? What if we "gifted" our wish list to a foster kid or two in Knox County?

I mean, let's just be very honest: probably very few of us have things on our wish list this year that we *actually need*. It's probably mostly just things that we *want*. Or even if it's things we need, it's not like we couldn't buy them for ourselves if we wanted. So last year, an item on my list was a ladder. I asked for a ladder for Christmas. But here's the thing—I could afford the ladder. But I just put it on my Christmas list because if somebody else buys me a ladder, I can spend my money on stuff I'd rather spend it on than a

ladder. So putting that ladder on my list was still materialism—it was just a more *indirect* way to participate in materialism. And I'd be willing to bet that's true for most of us—very few of us have *essential* items on our list. Like I bet if I looked through your Amazon wish list, none of you have bread and milk on there. Very few of you have jeans on your list because otherwise you're gonna have to walk around pantless for the next year. Most of us have things on our list that are just nice to have. Christmas lists in some ways have just become another way to “store up treasure for ourselves.”

So in light of that, would it not be a very practical way to fight against all of that this Christmas to just say “you know what? I don't need anything else. I have everything I need, and everything I will need, God will provide the ability for me to get it.” I'm not gonna fill up my garage or storage unit or closet with more stuff, because stuff is not what life is about. Instead, I'm gonna be content with what I have, and I'm gonna give my wish list to somebody that has far more needs than I do.

(And as a disclaimer, just in case you're thinking “well aren't we buying these kids Christmas presents? Isn't that just going to make them think that's what Christmas is about? Let me assure you, most of these kids are not in danger of “storing up treasure for themselves” currently. They're not in danger of having too much—but rather too little. Just wanted to set your mind at ease there)

And here's the thing. I'd be willing to bet that *even* if we do this, for a lot of us—even if we tell our family to not get us anything, they're probably gonna buy things off the website, *and still* get us something. Anybody else have a mom or dad that will probably still do it that way? Yep. But still, even if they *don't*, what an incredible opportunity to remember that Christmas, and life in general, are not about the abundance of our possessions. So **on Christmas morning, even if you don't have any or many gifts to open, in that moment you get to reflect entirely on the fact that God gave Jesus to you. And that life is actually about him—not stuff.**

So I'm not *requiring* that any of us do *anything*. This is not a command. It's just me offering up one very practical way that you might want to stomp out some materialism in your own heart this Christmas. And in the meantime, a way that we might provide even more for kids in need in our area. If you don't feel led to do that, no problem. But whether or not you donate your list, one way or another, **I would suggest that *all of us* think and pray through some practical ways to remember that life is not about the abundance of our possessions. And to operate in light of that reality.**

Let me pray for us to that end.