

“Life In The Fast Lane”

Luke 12:13-21

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+12:13-21)

Dr. David W. Swink

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“Save for retirement starting with your first paycheck.” (In other words be responsible financially!)

In Luke’s Gospel today, Jesus warns us of the eternal damage to us of a life lived focused on greed. The modern media advertizing calls Jesus a liar thousands of times each day. Unfortunately, we often choose to be more like the man who collects, collects, collects, and collects! We organize our lives around the mantra of more and more! And, we end up like this mother.

DVD: Mom Rant

Earlier in our history the American dream was all about freedom from tyranny, the opportunity to vote for our leaders, and the wonderful chance to be anyone we chose to be without any class or aristocratic barriers. Now, the dream seems to be to collect more and more stuff while running faster and faster. Life is like:

The Rocket Town Run!

Jim and Jane are so happy to finally own a home in Rocket Town. They have worked so hard. Three moves from three different homes have brought them into enough capital to just barely make the jump to Rocket Town. Of course, the mortgage is high. Both Jane and Jim must work overtime to meet the bills. It’s a shame that the children have to spend so much time in day care. But, they are so fortunate to have all the toys they have. They are also going to be happy to be a part of all that Rocket Town has to offer. Just think of it, soccer, little league football, cheerleading, dancing, extra camps all summer. Jane and Jim think that the children will be so busy they won’t notice their parents’ absence. Of course, transporting the kids to all those things is a problem, but Jane and Jim can get neighbors to help out. Between overtime, yard work, and the kids, these new Rocket Town parents fall into bed each night exhausted. They used to talk, but not anymore. Not enough time. They used to laugh and play, but not anymore. They are too tired. They used to have a little extra money to give to a charity, but not anymore. What with the mortgage payment, the 401K plans, the Roth IRA plans, the children’s designer clothes, the leases on the sport utility cars, and maxed out credit cards from last year’s Christmas, no money is left. In fact, Jim and Jane argue a lot about money because no matter how hard they work, they just don’t ever seem to have enough to go around.

Welcome Jane and Jim to Rocket Town. They do wonder if their dream house and their dream life is worth it. They each live in fear that something might happen to one of them. Sometimes in the dark of night each one separately longs for something different. Can’t life be simple again?

Is there a different car to drive to get to a different destination? Is it possible to get out of the fast lane and smell the roses in the garden? The answer to this Rocket Town longing is an emphatic YES. Yes, you can change! Your challenge is that God’s car is a manual transmission! You must learn all over again how to drive. You have to do some work to move ahead. Let me take you through the gears of God’s car that will take you out of the anxiety, stress, exhaustion, and terror of the false dream of Rocket Town.

FIRST GEAR: Wealth does not assure happiness.

Despite the many times we’ve heard that “Wealth cannot buy happiness,” most of us still believe that if we only had more money we would be happy. If we make \$30,000 a year, we are sure that true joy will come with a salary of \$60,000. If we earn a salary of \$100,000 a year, we are convinced that all our needs will be met with an income of \$200,000. The sad truth is that no amount of money can guarantee happiness. Not even hundreds of thousands of dollars a year are a cure for misery.

Magazine editor Lewis Lapham tells the story of a chance encounter with a Yale University classmate who had become a New York businessman. The two ran into each other about 30 years after their college graduation, and the businessman immediately began to cry on Lapham’s shoulder. “I’m nothing,” he said. “You understand that I earn \$250,000 a year, but it’s nothing, and I’m a nobody.”

The businessman's despair struck Lapham as being rather grotesque. After all, if the average American family of four earns an annual income in the tens of thousands of dollars, how could he possibly feel deprived? But when the businessman listed his expenses---Park Avenue apartment, private school tuition's, taxes, salaries for maid and part time laundress---the total came to \$300,000.00. He was clearly going broke on an income of \$250,000 a year.

"As it is," said the businessman, "I live like an animal. I eat tuna fish out of cans and hope that when the phone rings it isn't somebody dunning me for a bill." He might have been pulling down a quarter of a million dollars a year, but according to Lapham, he "had the look of a man who was being followed by the police." (Lewis H. Lapham, *Money and Class in America*. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1988. P.9-12)

Wealth does not bring happiness. We joke about this reality by saying that we would be different. Drop the lottery upon my head and I will be happy. But the truth is unless you are happy now, not even hundreds of millions of dollars will help you know the joy of being alive. Excitement for a while might happen. But, true joy is not in any way linked with material possessions.

Psalm 49:16-20(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=psalm+49:16-20) warns us of this truth:

*Do not be overawed when a person grows rich,
When the splendor of his house increases;
For he will take nothing with him when he dies,
His splendor will not descend with him.
Though while he lived he counted himself blessed---
And men praise you when you prosper---
He will join the generation of his fathers,
Who will never see the light of life.
A man who has riches without understanding
Is like the beasts that perish.*

When you live in God's economy who you are is not based on material possessions. Whether you are poor or rich, you are God's beloved child. Who do you think owns all there is in the universe? Who do you think actually created the land, water, and air on the earth? Yes, that's right—God! You are related to the Owner of all there is. You are God's beloved child. And as God's child you are rich through your inheritance. As God's child you inherit eternal life. As God's child you have gifts and talents that can make a difference in our world. God invites you to define your life by an eternal standard!

To define your life by the standard of money is to diminish your inheritance. To define your life by material wealth is to walk into a never-ending trap of comparison and competition.

Freedom with Christ comes when you engage first gear in God's car to be able to let go of the Rocket Town falsehood that wealth is defined by money. The wealthy life is not about money! As Jesus says in his story, if you die today, what will all this stuff you have collected mean?

Freedom with Christ comes when you affirm with your heart, mind, and soul that God's abundant life is not now, has never been, about material possessions. A relationship with God brings great joy. Material possessions do not bring happiness.

First gear: Celebrate God first! Enjoy the relationships of friends and family now. Stuff comes way down the ladder of importance.

SECOND GEAR: Decide to become a person who shares resources and does not hoard them.

The Marquis de Lafayette was a French general and politician who would have fit into the same social class as the rich man of **Luke 12** (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+12). He helped George Washington with the American Revolution, then returned to France and resumed his life as the master of several estates. In 1783, the harvest was a poor one, but the workers of Lafayette's farms still managed to fill his barns with wheat. "The bad harvest has raised the price of wheat," said one of his workers. "This is the time to sell." Lafayette thought about the hungry peasants in the surrounding villages. "No," he replied, "this is the time to give." (*The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*. Ed., Clifton Fadiman. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1985. P.339)

We need to rearrange the furniture in our minds. Resources are to be shared, not hoarded. Abundant harvests invite gift-giving, not barn building or profit taking. Lafayette was blessed with the opportunity to share his wealth with persons in need. This generosity did not impoverish him, it made him rich---rich before God. Such generosity is very good financial planning for someone who sees the eternal picture.

Our values as followers of Christ are not the values of the world in which we live.

1. The world says, "Take care of number one. If you don't take care of yourself, no one will" The late Frank Sinatra sang, "I did it my way." We all croon with him and try to live for ourselves first. Yet, Christ teaches us that all men and women are our neighbors. Self-interest is not the primary value. The Kingdom of God is first and foremost. Jesus told us to "*Seek first the Kingdom of God and let everything else flow from it.*" (**Matthew 6:33**) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+6:33) Jesus told us, "*Love your neighbors as yourselves.*" (**Matthew 22:39**) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+22:39)
2. The world says that the only basis for making a decision is whether it will bring about a successful profit. Yet, Christians decisions shall be based upon our love for God and God's creation. Profit is not the sole determinant. "*What will a person profit by winning the whole world at the cost of one's true self?*" (**Matthew 16:25**) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+16:25)
3. The world teaches that everything and everyone has a price. Money is the ultimate determiner of value. What you make and what you have determines how powerful and important you are in this world. But, in God's Kingdom the value of a person, a product, or a part of nature is determined not by what people will pay but by how important it is within itself. You are valuable to God, not because of what you can do, but because of who you are. Jesus said: "*Not one of the sparrows, which sell two for five pence, is overlooked by God. Have no fear, you are worth more than any number of sparrows.*" (**Luke 12:6-8**) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luk+12:6-8)
4. The world teaches that private wealth and individual ownership is the ultimate source of value. But, Jesus teaches that necessities for everyone come before luxuries for some. The early Christian church believed that the bounty of the earth belonged to God. "*The earth is God's, and all the fullness thereof.*" (**Psalms 24:1**) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=psalm+24:1) The highest value is living in relationship with God sharing God's wealth so that the world is transformed into God's place.

A decision to shift into the second gear of God's abundant living means that you become a giver. You will choose to search out ways to give. You will choose to give to God and to others instead of providing entertainment for yourself. Yes, you will actually give to God rather than going to the casino! Yes, you will actually give to God rather than going to the movies. When you become one of God's givers, you want to give!

The choice to become a giver impacts the way you spend your time and your money. When you ask God to partner with you in prioritizing the two big "C's" in your life. You know, the "Calendar" and the "Checkbook."

Second Gear: Choose to open your Mind and heart to God and actually prioritize your time and your money according to God's standard of generosity. When you make the choice to actually practice Jesus' kind of generosity and reject greed, then you will find God's peace growing within your life. As God's peace grows the fear and anxiety of Rocket Town will diminish.

THIRD GEAR: Serving God not money!

The author Robert Fulghum has written a series of best selling books, beginning with one call *All I Really Need to Know I learned in Kindergarten*. More than 14 million copies of his books are in print, and they are published in 27 languages and 93 countries. Needless to say, he has done very well financially. In an interview with a Christian periodical call *The Door*, Fulghum reports that since his success, people are always saying, "Well, you must have a big house and a big car." And he responds, "No, I have the same house, same car, same friends, same wife..." Fulghum is on guard against all kinds of greed, and is committed to serving God, not money.

Of course, fame is a challenge, he admits, "and the challenge is to be a good steward with this kind of authority and power---especially the economics." So one year he did a book tour, and used it to raise \$670,000 for a number of good causes. "I don't think I should be given extra credit for doing that," he says. "I think you should think ill of me if I didn't do that." Death does not scare Robert Fulghum. In fact, he has already picked out his grave, and he likes to visit it. It reminds him to live life in a way that is rich toward God. When he sees his own grave Fulghum says to himself, "Don't get lost here. Know where you are going." (*The Door*, May/June, 1995)

Deciding to ask God to be first in your heart and your checkbook means that your household budget will look different. You will look with God's vision and see the world, not just your neighborhood. When you see the world, you will know how wealthy you are. You will also know how great the need is among the children of the world for food, shelter, and clothing. When you see the real needs of your brothers and sisters worldwide, then the latest advertised toy, the latest fashion, the latest must have investment, all these will be placed in God's priority.

John Wesley asked of himself, not how much do I give to God this year. Rather, Wesley asked, how much do I need to live comfortably and he gave the rest to God. Wesley transformed the church in the Seventeenth Century: not because he was a good preacher. He wasn't. He transformed the world because he was a faithful servant of God's gifts. He chose to be one of God's servants on a daily basis. That choice made all the difference for John Wesley, and it will make all the difference for you.

Third gear: Choose right now to ask the Risen Christ to come into your heart, mind, and soul and help you become one of God's faithful, generous servants who are making an eternal difference right here.

Cruising life's open road in God's Car!

When you work through the first gear and really believe that wealth does not bring happiness; when you work through the second gear and decide to be one of God's givers; and when you work through the third gear and choose to be a true servant of Christ; then you are on a road trip with God. Christ is your pilot. The Holy Spirit is navigating with you. Death is not the all fearful specter somewhere out ahead. You are not paralyzed by death because you are cruising to a different level, and eternal one.

When you have worked through the gears you will approach your treasure differently. You will see what is ultimately important. Things take a back seat. Larger and larger bank accounts and stock portfolios are transitory. A bigger house is a worthless expenditure of time and money. What is truly important is the treasure you are storing up with God. What lasts for all eternity is the relationships with your family, neighbors, friends, and relatives. What lasts for all eternity is the investment you make in helping feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, provide education to the illiterate, and healing to the hurting people on God's planet.

If you feel you are in the rat race, if you feel you are racing around but getting nowhere; if you feel you are trapped in Rocket Town with your adrenaline pumping but your heart empty; then you can begin a trip right out of Rocket Town today. Ask Jesus Christ to work through the gears with you. With Christ as a partner, you will soon be looking back and saying good-bye to the anxiety, stress, emptiness, and the terror of Rocket Town.