

It is an often asked question, "if your house were on fire and you could save just one thing what would it be? In one set of answers on the web things like pets, cameras with memory cards, papers and pictures came up and then someone said the phone to ring the fire brigade!

It is a means of raising in our minds questions about our possessions. For most of us they are so many. I remember when I went to theological college I took all I possessed in the back of my Morris minor! Today it would be very different!

From the youngest to the oldest here we all have possessions and this morning as we finish our series on stewardship I want to try and explore with us how we should view the things we have, our possessions.

Let me begin by asking what would Jesus say to us about our possessions?

To help us let's have a reading from Luke 12:13-21

Now just to remind us that parables have one main teaching point and because they are stories we should not try and find a meaning in each little bit.

So, as we look at the parable, what was the main thing Jesus wanted to get across to the disciples and those listening in?

The answer is there in v15, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions"

He warned them against greed and then that summary that a person's life or better salvation is not found in the overflow of their possessions. In other words be careful because having lots doesn't guarantee a place in heaven.

Right have we got that? That is what Jesus says about possessions that we have to be careful of them because they can create in us a greed for more and more and because ultimately they will not save us.

He then goes on to tell this story of the rich landowner, who had a great crop one year, ripped down his old barns which were inadequate to store all the grain and all his possessions and prepared to sit back and enjoy life.

Then comes the twist, as so often happens in Jesus' parables, God's verdict on the man was that he was a fool.

I tell you that must have shaken a few people up as Jesus said it and perhaps it raises a few eyebrows here this morning. Surely the man was being eminently sensible, surely he was setting a positive example to follow. Why did God call him a fool?

I think there are a number of things but only one real reason for this damning verdict.

1. He was greedy and selfish

Jesus had just spoken about greed and now he tells this story so it must be about greed. The man whose question set the ball rolling in v13 may have had a similar problem as he wanted his share of the inheritance but in the rich man here we see greed. He has a good crop, far more than he needs, can use or even can store so what does he do? He builds bigger barns. It would seem the thought of passing on to others some of what he has been given never occurs to him.

I love the story that was in the press some years back of a man who had won £675,000 on the football pools. His comment at the press conference was, "I've already got all I want this win just makes my comfortable life even more comfortable. I'm going to bank the money and take the interest." The report closed with these words, "and just to confirm that he wouldn't be splashing out he walked away from the press reception with a notepad and pencil provided for the reporters. "I think I'll nick these" he chuckled."

2. There was an overemphasis on things

The point Jesus was making is that life is more than things but here the man's life seems to revolve around his possessions. It was not just the grain that required keeping but all his goods. It would seem that his sole concern was with what he had and with acquiring more.

I was intrigued during the week as I was preparing for today to put bigger barns into Google and come across a website of that name which is and I quote, "a Christian personal finance website dedicated to helping others reach their financial dreams". I did find that odd in that here is Jesus in effect condemning these barns and the attitude behind them as bad and someone totally missing that point as they seek to help people focus on money.

The man was far too focussed on things.

3. he was only concerned with this life.

We might think we was being wise in that he was making plans for the future, setting aside things for a rainy day. But actually part of the problem for the man was that he was short sighted. I don't mean he should have gone to spec savers, but his only concern was with what was going on in this world. He had no thought for his eternal future. His life consisted solely of his possessions.

4. he thought he was in control.

Just look and see how often the words I and my are used. He thought he was in control of his life as he was in control of his possessions. In other words he was god, the ruler of his world and his life. As someone once said "he was a self-made man who worshipped his creator." Whereas in reality God was in control and in v20 his life was demanded of him.

It is here we begin to get to the real reason why God called this rich landowner a fool, because it is the fool who says in his heart there is no God (Ps 14:1). It was his denial of God that deemed him a fool. Oh yes he may have given lip service to the concept of God many people do but in practice he was an atheist.

It seems to me all the other things stem out of this one factor that he didn't recognise God in his life. He was his own God therefore what he had was his and so why should he give it away? Why shouldn't he store it up for future years and enjoy some luxury. After all he was fit and well and had plenty of years of life to look forward to.

He was a fool because when he died and stood before God what could he plead? That he was rich – pointless? That he had plenty of things – hopeless. Please don't get me wrong if he had shared it all out like old George in the puppet sketch he still wouldn't have had anything to plead before God because our only hope in the face of a holy God is the death of Jesus. But this man had ignored and denied God and was a fool.

So what should be our attitude to possessions? How can we be good stewards of what we have?

A right attitude has to begin with a proper relationship with God, where we acknowledge him as God and ourselves as his children, adopted as such through that death of Jesus, which changes us from enemies of God to his friends and children. If I get that right then my attitude will be

right. If I recognise God as God then I will see all that is in my possession as given from him. As James put it in his letter, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (James 1:17)

Think for a moment of a baby or young child. What do they have? Only what has been given to them and mostly by their parents because they are their child. Your heavenly Father gives you what you have because you are his child, he has made you and more he has bought you back to be his child through the death of his only son. So you are doubly precious. No wonder Jesus said, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matt 7:11)

This is the basic understanding God would want us to have about the things we have, they are God given because we are his children.

If the things we have are God given how can we be good stewards of them?

Let me use three words to get us started thinking on how we can be good stewards of the things that God has blessed us with.

1. Appreciate

This is in a sense a mixture of understanding and thankfulness – understanding that all things come from God and being thankful for all he gives us. This comes as we recognise God as giver and move away from the idea that somehow what we have is achieved or earned by us.

Then with the thankfulness should be an appreciation that is an enjoyment of and appreciation of the gifts God gives us.

Last week we had a letter from a friend following a note sent to her on her birthday. She said this, "I am so thankful that I am celebrating another birthday. It didn't seem very likely last November and I count every day as a special gift." Appreciating the gift God gave.

If we are truly grateful for all God gives us and appreciate what he has given us it helps to move us away from greed to a contentedness with what our heavenly Father has given us so that instead of continually wanting more we accept, enjoy and appreciate what we have.

So where are we with this? Do we count our blessings and thank God for the gifts he has given us or do we look with envy at what others have and have a sense of discontent within.

The good steward will appreciate what he or she has.

2. Use

If we are to be good stewards of God's gifts it means we will use them. One of the best gifts I ever received is my cricket hat. It has in it a radio so I can listen to the cricket. Now on receiving it I was thankful and appreciative but more than that I used it. In fact so much so that this is now the second hat I've had.

Now it sounds obvious that we use what God gives us but it isn't always the case. Just as we all have many things stuck away at the back of cupboards and drawers so it is easy not to use what God has given us, be it possessions, time, talents, money or our very lives.

3. simple

This is the main thing which I feel God wants to say to us about stewardship of possessions and that is to keep life simple. Things got difficult for the rich landowner when he realised he had more than he could keep in his barns. His greed meant he couldn't off load some of the excess to others.

I think if we would be good Stewards of what God gives us we need to think more about living a simple lifestyle, not accumulating possessions, not storing up things that we rarely if ever use.

At the heart of this is a willingness to share, something the rich landowner seemed oblivious to.

I liked the story I read recently of Basingstoke Town fan Jack Miller who won a football competition for keeping a square ball up in the air. He won a prize of £10k but immediately gave £1 to each of the other finalists.

If we see what we have as God given then our clear response should not be to hold it for ourselves but to share it with others. The attitude of sharing, of giving things away is a great antidote to seeing things as ours and to greed. So how are you at giving things away? How are you at sharing?

In Acts we read how the early Christians had "everything in common". They shared their possessions with each other. It made good use of resources and saved them from greed. One church I was in had a list of some things that people had and offered for others to use such as lawnmowers, cars, and so on. There must be in our homes and garages a thousand and one things we rarely use which others could borrow and which would save others having to buy and own.

You know in my garage I have a pressure washer. It is still in its box unopened. I got it when I insured my car with a certain company. So far it has not entered my head to use it and even when Anna, my daughter, and her husband Chris were washing their car on our drive the other day it still didn't occur to me to use it. It is something I could share with others or even give away but actually behind it I think there is something deeper. Some years back we had a series of tapes entitled "how to organise your life and get rid of clutter".

The talks mentioned how to declutter our homes from all the stuff we just seem to hang onto and in one talk they mentioned putting things in boxes dating the box and then if a year later you haven't opened the box get rid of it.

Now many of us squirm because we just couldn't do that.

I have managed to wash cars for years without using a pressure washer yet if you were to come up to me afterwards and say I really could use that washer can I have it, I would struggle not because I'm going to use it tomorrow but simply because I have it and will struggle to give away something I have – that is the deeper issue. I'm storing up my goods in the barn of my garage, loft, cupboards and so on as are many of us.

We are just like Gollum in the Lord of the rings holding tightly to our precious even if we have almost forgotten what it is we have. Isn't that true? So how do we live more simply? It has to begin again with recognising that all that we have is from God and being willing to sit loose to what we have so that we are able to share things, or to give them away or pass them on so that they benefit others.

If we would be good stewards then living simply should be part of it.

The rich landowner was a fool because his greed caused him to desire more and more and in so doing to deny the very existence of God.

If we accept God and trust him for all we need then our attitude to possessions should be radically different, recognising God as giver and therefore everything as his to be appreciated and used, not clung onto but shared.