

Reality Check

It's not that building bigger barns was the sin. God had blessed this man with an abundant harvest and, apparently, the wisdom to manage a successful farming operation. So abundant were God's blessings that if the man didn't build bigger barns, his crops would rot out in the field. So, it's not that the bigger barns was the sin. Nor was it a sin to save for the future. That's just wise, biblical, financial stewardship. That's what Joseph did in Egypt when he stored up grain during the seven years plenty to prepare for the seven years of famine. And there are many passages in the book of Proverbs about saving money. So, it's not a sin to save for the future. Nor is it even a sin to eat, drink, and be merry. It's not wrong to enjoy a meal, perhaps with good friends – to laugh together, dine together, enjoy time together. We see Jesus enjoying meals at social gatherings in Gospels. So, you can't say that wining, dining, and reclining is itself a sin.

And yet here God says, **vs. 20ab** – which I'm sure came as a huge shock to the man because he thought everything was fine. But the real problem, the sin, was that he was living in a false reality. He had convinced himself that he was sovereign over his own life, while ignoring the reality that God is in control (not him), all these blessings came from the Lord (not him), and that God actually cares about what's in the heart. He was living in a false reality. So, the Lord gave this rich fool a reality check. **Vs. 20b**. In other words, you're going to die. On this Ash Wednesday, the Lord gives us a reality check, too: dust you are, and to dust you shall return. In other words, you're going to die. And we may try to convince ourselves that we are sovereign over our own lives or that God doesn't really care what's in our heart. But today God says, "Time out; don't fool yourself; don't distort reality." On this first day of Lent, this Ash Wednesday, God says, "You need a reality check."

Reality check #1: life is not all about possessions. Whole parable starts off when **vs. 13**. And while sometimes Jewish rabbis did act like probate judges, Jesus wants none of this. **Vs. 14**, because he knew, whatever the circumstances in this case were, this man's heart was filled with greed. So, to gathered crowd, Jesus said, **vs. 15**.

Imagine for just a moment that your home and everything in it burned to ground – totally destroyed, gone forever. What would that do to you? Certainly it would break your heart – all those precious memories; all those keepsakes. And it would complicate your life – you'd have to figure out where to live, what to wear, how to get by. But what wouldn't it do to you? It wouldn't change God's love for you; it wouldn't jeopardize your salvation; it wouldn't rob you of anything you were going to take with you into heaven. Earthly possessions are only meant for this life. And it's fine to have them, and enjoy them – we receive all God's gifts with gratitude. But earthly possessions (like our homes, our vehicles, our treasures, our wealth) – these are not the essence of a meaningful life. We spend so much time and energy accumulating trinkets that will never come with us to heaven, and we distort the reality that only Jesus gives life true meaning. Then greed grips our hearts, and we dethrone the Lord and replace him with the golden calf of wealth and possessions. Jesus warns us here against idolatry and greed. And Paul reminds us in 1 Timothy 6: **"Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people 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" (9-10).**

So the reality check that God wants us learn, and that the fool in the parable learned the hard way, is that life is more than the stuff you own. If you lose it all, if it burns to ground, you will have lost nothing of eternal value. So, instead, embrace the reality that you have the most valuable treasure anyone could ever have – Christ Jesus, his love for you, his grace that covers all your sins, his constant presence and providence in your life, and his promise of your eternal life. That's what the rich fool in parable completely overlooked. For him, life was all about material wealth. But reality check: that's not what life's all about. **Vs. 15c**. Jesus is our greatest treasure. Everything else is just stuff for this short life.

Which brings us to reality check #2: this life is short. You do not know when it will end. Dust you are, and to dust you shall return – perhaps sooner than you may think. We don't like talking about death or thinking about

death; the man in the parable certainly didn't. He said to himself **vs. 19**, to which God replied, **vs. 20**. The Lord of life and death knows the date of your death; and you do not; so you should not live like you do. Reality check: you could die at any time. You may or may not know this, but a few days ago we had a funeral for two people who, in a matter of seconds, went from normal life to eternal life – it happened so quickly! And I can think of other people from St. John's whom the Lord brought out of this world with remarkable abruptness. Other times he blesses people with a long, full life. I've had some elderly people say to me, "Pastor, I don't know why the Lord hasn't taken me yet." And then there are situations where a person endures prolonged suffering, and their death is drawn out over several months. We do not always understand why the Lord makes the decisions he does. He does not share his datebook with us, nor does he guarantee a long, healthy life. But he does promise that **"the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23)**. And he does promise that dust you are, and to dust you shall return. And he does promise that our times are in his hands (Ps 31:15). When we die is for him to decide.

That is a powerful reality check, for every one of us! The rich fool learned it the hard way. **Vs. 20b**. How will we learn to live with the reality of death? Will we live with dour pessimism? "Well, we're just going to die anyway; might as well live it up while we can, accumulate all the stuff we can; eat, drink, and be merry." No, that's a false reality. We are going to die, but that's not the main message of Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is not a day of hopeless pessimism, sin and death, dust to dust. No, Ash Wednesday, and the entire Lenten season, shows us the beauty of a life lived in repentance and faith. We can live with the reality of death by living in repentance and faith, which means saying, "I know that I have done wrong, and that I am wrong; but in faith I turn to and trust in the only one who can make things right, who makes me right." And that's Jesus. Repentance is so beautiful because it leads straight to Jesus; faith is so powerful because it trusts solely in Jesus! The rich fool in the parable wanted a meaningful life without repentance, without faith, without the Lord, without understanding that life is more than possessions, without understanding that life is short. That was his false reality, and he never got his meaningful life.

But on this Ash Wednesday, reality check #3: Jesus makes life meaningful, by forgiving our sins and drawing us to himself through repentance. He bore all our sins on the cross, and he works repentance in our hearts to bring us the forgiveness he won for us. So today if our confession is a little longer, it just makes our forgiveness a little sweeter. And with the promise of forgiveness comes the promise of eternal life. So even though dust you are, and to dust you shall return, because of Jesus, *from* dust you shall return. Someday you are going to return from the dust of death, when Jesus raises you from the dead on the Last Day. And you will live with Jesus, body and soul, in heaven forever. Jesus conquered sin and death for you, to release you from the guilt of sin, and to raise you from the dust of death. The beautiful reality check for us today is that Jesus makes life meaningful. You don't have to be consumed with wealth when you have the greatest treasure of all. You don't have to be scared of death when you know that the risen Christ will someday raise you from the dead.

So, yes, dust you are, and to dust you shall return – someday you're going to die, because of your sin. But Jesus is your Savior, from the guilt of sin and the dust of death. In Jesus we have meaningful life, right now, and forever. So there's hope in these ashes, because after *to* dust you shall return, then *from* dust you shall return. And that's the most meaningful and beautiful reality check of all.

Luke 12:13-21

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." ¹⁴ Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" ¹⁵ Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'" ¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

²⁰ "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?'"

²¹ "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."