

# 10

## Give Eternally

*“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12:32-33)*

A few years ago, I conducted a funeral for an elderly man whose family lived out of state. It was their plan to leave immediately after the funeral for the long drive home, taking with them what remained of dad’s possessions. The family arrived at the church and as they were being seated, I looked outside at the cars in the parking lot. There next to the hearse, the family had parked their car, hitched to a U-Haul trailer, loaded up with dad’s belongings. A hearse and a U-Haul trailer side by side. I wonder if it caused anyone going by to question whether someone was trying to take it with them after all?

In the play by Tennessee Williams, “Cat On A Hot Tin Roof,” Big Daddy says, “Yes sir, boy—the animal is a beast that dies, and if he’s got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be everlasting!—Which it can never be.”

Does that sound correct in your mind? Jesus would say no. In fact, He said the opposite:

*“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted” (Luke 12:33).*

Jesus would tell us that we can’t take it with us—not in a U-Haul trailer—but we can invest our possessions and our lives in things that allow us to give eternally. This is not an easy lesson for me to learn. I am torn between two competing desires of what I should invest

my life toward. At this point in my life, I find myself wanting to invest in what I call my “retirement life style.” I do not necessarily want to be wealthy and rich. The lottery is not a temptation for me. However, I want to insure a lifestyle in retirement that is at least comfortable. There is nothing wrong or sinful in that. Yet, I am too easily distracted by what is visible and before me. Competing with this desire is my desire to invest my life in things that last—things that will last beyond me.

What complicates all of this is that the world seems to be changing the rules as to what is important and necessary for a “comfortable retirement.” I know, I do not have to buy into that, but too often I fall into the trap. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the average American had 72 “wants” and considered 18 of them important. One hundred years later, the average American has 496 “wants” and considers 96 of them as genuine necessities for happiness (Miller, p. 5).

Being honest, though, it is not the changing scene of America’s values, nor is it my approaching retirement that causes me to be torn. It is me. Down deep, down to the very nature of my being, I am sinful. My very nature is corrupt. “Off track” would be another way to say it. “Bent,” “Crooked,” “Warped”—whatever way you want to describe it. The Confessors of our faith expressed it this way:

“Furthermore, it is taught among us that since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are

conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this same innate disease and original sin is truly sin and condemns to God's eternal wrath all who are not in turn born anew through baptism and the Holy Spirit.

“Rejected, then, are the Pelagians and others who do not regard original sin as sin in order to make human nature righteous through natural powers, thus insulting the suffering and merit of Christ” (Book of Concord, The Augsburg Confession, Article II: Original Sin, pp. 36, 38.1-3).

Corrupt. Full of lust. Lacking true fear. Yet, I am born again. In my Baptism, I have been created anew. There is a new nature within me that desires to invest in things eternal. The two natures compete against each other within me. Things can too easily take possession of me. I know, however, that I am spiritually healthier when I hold onto my possessions loosely, using them to serve others.

Mother Teresa apparently understood the importance of holding onto possessions loosely. A story is told of a time that she was visiting Australia. A new recruit to the monastery in Australia was assigned to be her guide and “gofer” during her stay. The young man was so thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this woman. He dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, he never had the opportunity to say one word to her. There were always other people for her to meet.

Finally, her tour was over, and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the friar had his opportunity to speak to Mother Teresa. He said to her, “If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the

plane so I can talk to you and learn from you?” Mother Teresa looked at him. “You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?” she asked. “Oh, yes,” he replied eagerly. “Then give that money to the poor,” she said, “You’ll learn more from that than anything I can tell you.”

When I heard that story, I wondered if the young friar was as disappointed as the young man who approached Jesus as to what he must do to get eternal life. Jesus told him to observe and keep the law. His response was, “*All these I have kept*” (Matthew 19:20). Rather than laugh at him, Jesus says, “*If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven*” (v. 21). The young man walked away.

Wealthy in the wallet but poor in the soul. Jesus was inviting him to invest in things eternal, things that will last. I believe that if this young man were to walk in our churches today, we would view him as being very religious and upright. But his heart was not right. His wallet was expanding, but the capacity of his heart to love was shrinking. That moment in Jesus’ life always causes me to pause and ask myself what I am investing and giving my life toward.

David Livingston understood what it meant to give eternally. He was willing to give up his possessions for the sake of the poor. His efforts would open the doors of evangelistic opportunity in Africa. He walked across the continent twice—both directions. As he traveled, he made maps and told people about Jesus. It was reported that when he died, his body was to be transported back to London for burial. The night before the ship sailed, the citizens of Africa came aboard, cut out his heart and buried it beneath a large tree in West Africa. His body would be taken back to London, but his heart belonged in Africa where he had invested so much of his life.

If people were to bury your heart, where would they bury it? Beside a ball park?

Beside a church? Beside a mission within the city? Beside a pile of reports of investments? Where do you invest your heart?

The mission that Jesus has given to us invites us to invest our hearts and lives in things that have eternal consequences. What does this look like when it occurs? Recently, I was back in the church where I grew up as a young boy. The church has changed in many ways with exciting growth and many new faces. One face that is no longer there (for he is now before the throne of God) is that of Gordon. He was once my Sunday School teacher. As far as teaching goes, he was not necessarily gifted in that area. I do not remember any outstanding lesson that he taught. He invested his heart, however, in people. He was always there. He gave of himself. Years later he would be willing to travel hundreds of miles in order to attend significant moments in my life. He and his wife invested in those whom they served. He invested in people, and in so doing gave of

himself eternally. My life and character were shaped by his investment. My ministry and service to others has been deeply influenced by his example. How many lives have been touched through his investment? What stories might be told in heaven that will link back to this mild-spoken man who invested his heart in the lives of some junior high children, who gave of himself eternally?

**Prayer:** “Forbid it Lord, that our roots become too firmly attached to this earth, that we should fall in love with things. Help us to understand that the pilgrimage of this life is but an introduction, a preface, a training school for what is to come. Then shall we see all of life in its true perspective. Then shall we not fall in love with the things of time, but come to love the things that endure. Then shall we be saved from the tyranny of possessions which we have no leisure to enjoy, of prosperity whose care becomes a burden. Give us, we pray, the courage to simplify our lives” (Peter Marshall, p. 33). **Amen.**

**Challenge:** Identify one purchase that you have wanted to make that you would be willing to forego and instead, give the money to a ministry or a charity. Or, devote some of your time to serving or ministering to others that you would have otherwise used for your own pleasure.

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 12

**From the Book of Concord:** “Let each and everyone, then, see to it that you esteem this commandment above all things and not make light of it. Search and examine your own heart thoroughly, and you will discover whether or not it clings to God alone. If you have the sort of heart that expects from him nothing but good, especially in distress and need, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God, then you have the one, true God. On the contrary, if your heart clings to something else and expects to receive from it more good and help than from God and does not run to God but flees from him when things go wrong, then you have another god, an idol” (The Large Catechism, The First Commandment, p. 390.28).