

Sermon for Sunday, July 17, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
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"WHEN THE BARN IS BUILT BUT YOUR PERMIT EXPIRES"

St. Lukes 12:20

Text: "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

St. Luke 12:13-21

Several months ago I visited a very dear friend in the hospital. His doctor had just told him the news that he had an inoperable malignancy. We talked about it for a bit and then he said with a wry sort of grin, "Anybody who thinks he is going to live forever is just a fool." He is right, of course. The only problem is, death is always something that happens to the other fellow. Most of us refuse to face up to the inevitable reality of life and death. Now death is a grim sort of subject to be talking about, but if we want to be realists, and Christians are people who are realistic, who accept life as it truly is, then from time to time it is necessary that we think about things like that. And this morning I want to talk about the day that our building permit expires.

When my friend said what he did about death, I could not help but think of our scripture for this morning - the parable of the man who finished building his barn only to discover that his building permit had expired. The first thing I want to say about this parable is that it is not bad to be a barn builder. Nowhere in the New Testament do you find a sweeping condemnation of people who use their talents and abilities and gifts wisely and well in order to accumulate material possessions. As a matter of fact, the Bible teaches us that God expects us to be good stewards of the things He has committed to us if He has given us special talents and gifts then He expects us to use them. So the man in our parable was not a fool because he was building bigger barns.

Now it is true that being a barn builder has some hidden dangers. One of the dangers of barn building is that the builder begins to credit himself with his success. Let me read part of the parable to you again and as I do so I will underscore the personal pronouns of the rich man and when you do that here is how the parable sounds: "what shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, I will do this; I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years...'" Now, he was obviously suffering from a serious case of "I" disease.

Do you have that problem about your successes? I know I do. For example, if I preach a sermon and you are warmly responsive to it, I go home from church and I feel, "My, didn't I do well today!" But, then if you're not all that responsive and I go home thinking, "Well, Lord you really let the people down this morning!" And that is one of the very real dangers of barn building--we get to giving ourselves credit for our successes and we're living life without references to God who gave us the talents and the abilities for barn building.

Another hidden danger of barn building is that we begin to get self-sufficient. The barn builder in the parable that Jesus told didn't need any help from anybody. As he put it, he had ample goods laid up for many years and he could eat, drink and be merry. Isn't that one of the serious dangers of having complete material security? We begin to think we are self-sufficient and we don't need anything or anybody, not even God. You know, Jesus talks a lot about the dangers of being rich. He never says, "Being rich is bad", He says, "It can be dangerous." You see the poor man knows he is utterly dependent upon God. I remember back in Mississippi during the days of the depression there in the little rural community in which I was born and raised. There were many times during those hard years when we

finished breakfast we had no assurance that we would have anything for dinner that night. And when we prayed, "Lord, give us this day our daily bread, we really meant business." But the man who has plenty is often hard put to recognize his dependency upon God, and when that happens barn building gets to be dangerous business.

Another hidden danger of barn building is that it gets you focused in on things. In my profession I frequently deal with people in all sorts of crisis situations and let me assure you that when life is stripped down to its basic ingredients, the things that are important are not material. What do material things matter when a loved one lies dead? What do material things matter when your marriage is falling apart and coming to pieces before you? What do material things matter when you have broken and violated your relationship with Jesus and you no longer even feel that your prayers are getting through? What do material things matter when your children, in whom you have set your hopes, have gone astray? What do material things matter when a loved one has betrayed you, or a heart is broken? No, in this life we live, the things that ultimately matter the most are human relationships, personal feelings, spiritual dimensions. So barn building can fool you. It can get you focused in on material things and one day you awaken to the tragic realization that after all, the most important thing in life has not been the barn, but human relationships and spiritual relationships. I remember reading a story about a young man who went to the Klondike when gold was discovered there and spent fifteen years working in the area, and did actually make a rich find. Some fifteen or twenty years later he was able to come back home a rich man, only to discover when he arrived home that the family homestead was vacant and empty--his people were gone or dead. The old friends that he longed to see were gone, or moved on, or passed away. So he came back to find that his gold didn't really matter to him that much any more for all of the human relationships he had counted on were gone.

In my own case I know I can get so focused in on being a success as a pastor that I begin to neglect my family, I neglect my friends, I neglect human relationships. And, just to be honest, sometimes I can get so busy doing the Lord's work that I don't have time for the Lord, to pray and talk with Him and to read His word. Are you guilty of that? Does your job get to be so important that you put it ahead of everything else? Do you men get so busy being successful, so busy making money, that you neglect the really important thing--things like building the relationship with your wife, building a relationship with your children? Do you get so focused in on barn building, accumulating things, that you intend someday to build a relationship with your children only to discover too late that they have grown up and gone and you can never do what you wanted and intended to do? What about you wives, do you get so busy with being the best possible mother that you neglect building the relationship with your husband? Do you get so focused in on your home and doing the things of the housewife that you're ignoring your family? You know, one of the tragedies I discover among so many couples as they reach their middle years is that the father has been off focused in on barn building, focused in on being a success in the material world, and the wife has been focused in on raising the children and investing herself in them. Suddenly the father is successful and no longer needs to spend all that time with the barn and the mother discovers the children have grown up and gone and the two of them no longer have anything in common, and a marriage is dissolving and being destroyed. Yes, there are some real dangers in barn building because it can get us focused in on the wrong things.

Let me illustrate. Do you remember the fable that Tolstoy, the Russian writer tells about? According to this fable which is entitled, "How Much Land Does a Man Require?" a Russian peasant was made a proposition by a wealthy landowner that he could have all the land that he could walk around in one day. So the man placed his cap on the ground to mark the starting point and he began to walk. Soon he saw a field that would be just right for corn and he widened his circle. As he went along he saw another field just right for potatoes, so he increased the circle a little more. Before long, as he made his circle larger and larger it became necessary to trot if he were going to get back to the starting point. But he saw a cope of trees here that he would need for fire wood and he increased his circle. A little pond here that he would need for water and the circle grew larger. Finally, in order to get back by sunset, he began to run. But, as his circle grew, the faster he had to run until as last he was running with all his might, and his heart was pounding, his lungs were gasping for air and every muscle in his body cried out in pain from the effort but still he drove himself on. Just as the sun went down he staggered back to the starting place and fell across his cap - dead! When did that peasant really die? Well, I suppose he really died when his greed for material things so possessed him that he made his circle larger and larger. One of the things that bothers me so much about my dear liberal friends in our denomination is that they are so focused in social action, doing things for people, and certainly none of us would be opposed to doing things for those in need because our commitment to Jesus Christ demands that we care what happens to other people. But when we make the totality of our concern for them to be things, we fail to give them the most important thing we have to offer which is a spiritual relationship to Jesus Christ.

Yes, there are hidden dangers in barn building because we get focused in on material things that make us miss what is truly important in life. However, let me emphasize again that barn building, while having hidden dangers, was not the reason the man in our parable was called a fool.

Why was he a fool? Because he wasn't also building a mansion! Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you, and I go to prepare a place for you that where I am there you may be also." As Jesus put it, the man in the parable was not rich towards God.

I want to put the question to you this morning, "Is your heavenly home, your eternal mansion, under construction?" The man in the parable was so busy building barns that when eternity came he had forgotten to build himself an eternal home with God. He was rich towards the world but he was poverty stricken towards God.

One gets the impression that maybe the rich man intended to build himself a spiritual mansion later. When he had more time, when the barns got finished, when everything else was done, then he would turn his attention to eternity. But that very day God said to him, "This night your soul is required of you." Yes, he finished his barn only to discover that his building permit had expired.

Do you remember from your history books the story of Cortez invading Mexico when Mexico was ruled by the Aztecs? Cortez had taken a city but he knew that that night the Aztecs would attack, and he knew that he did not have the resources to hold them off, so he prepared his men to flee the city. He warned them against loading themselves with the gold they had found and said to them, "he travels safest in the night who travels lightest." Some did as their general advised, but others, unable to resist stuffed their packs with gold objects. Some even took gold chains and wrapped them around their waist. But, as the troops fled, those carrying gold began to feel the burden and fell behind and they were the ones who became victims of the Aztec spears and arrows. The rich man of the parable was carrying new barns on his back and when death's spear pierced his heart he had not even begun construction of his mansion - no, he was not rich towards God.



Yes, the barn is built, but your building permit suddenly expires. Now, many of you this morning have great, fine barns. I know that, you know that, but I want to ask you how construction is going on your heavenly mansion? Beloved, are you rich toward God?

There in the hospital my friend said, "Anybody who thinks he is going to live forever is just a fool", and of course, he is right. When the time comes that our soul is required of us, when the time comes that our building permit expires, our barns won't be nearly so important to us then.

Back when I was a child there was a hymn we used to sing a lot entitled, "My, Jesus, I love thee" and we're going to sing it later on as our closing hymn. The last verse goes like this: "In mansions of glory and endless delight, I'll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright; I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow, If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus 'tis now."

I believe in life after death. I believe in heaven where those who are rich towards God will be with him. I believe that there will truly be mansions of glory and endless delight. I also believe that right here on earth at this very moment, we all have buildings under construction, barns and mansions. And it isn't wrong to build barns. It's just that one day the barns won't matter all that much and the mansions will. Suppose for you when your barn is built and you are ready to start your mansion, you discover that your building permit has expired--will God say to you as he did to the rich fool, "and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" That's a good question for each of us to ask himself, "Indeed, who gets the barns, and who cares--what do I do for a mansion?" What do you do?