

“Self-Control in the Land of Bigger and Bigger Barns”

Titus 3:1-3a, Luke 12:13-19

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Fourth in a series on *Fruits of the Spirit*

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.

Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then 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; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

Dr. Will Willimon, former chaplain at Duke University, told this story about inviting a group of students to his home on the first Sunday of the school year. They had enjoyed a nice picnic. Some lingered to shoot hoops or to talk. He sat on the patio with one student, who said to him, "Dr. Willimon, thanks for having us over to your home. This is the first time I've ever been in a faculty home".

Willimon responded that he thought that was a disgrace. He added that he thought faculty should have students over to their homes as much as possible.

"Well, few faculty think that way, I can tell you," said the student. "And you have a beautiful home," he said. "Let me ask you, do you feel at all guilty being a Christian and living in such a nice house? How have you thought about that?"

Willimon soon remembered why he thought it wasn't such a great idea to have people over to the house.¹

Whatever we may think about who Jesus was, whenever we may argue about "What Would Jesus Do?" it is impossible to have much of a debate about what Jesus would have thought about our passion for pleasure, things, and big barns.

This parable of the big barns is yet another one of those pesky examples of "the gospel is bad news before it is good news". Unfortunately, they are all over the Bible! This is another one of those times when the gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. You remember the end of this parable---things don't end up so well for the man with the big barns.

WHY do we have so much passion for filling up our barns with things that are not God? Why do we keep building bigger and bigger barns? What is behind all this? And how can we begin to break free from it?

One problem is our consumer culture. We live and breathe it. We cannot escape it, even with considerable effort. Just buying a cup of coffee at White Rock Coffee is daunting: you have to choose what type of coffee, what kind of milk, how many shots of what sugar-free flavor you want in your decaf skimmed milk double frappacino latte. The only kind of coffee you could get in the 1980s was caf or de-caf. There wasn't this dizzying array of thousands of permutations for what amounts to a \$5 cup of coffee. The barns-full of different flavors, beans, roasts, additives, soy products, etc., didn't EVEN EXIST.

Our consumer culture (and the greed that feeds it) is at least partly to blame for our foolish devotion to bigger and bigger barns, to feeding the self over and above everything else.

The problem with serving our passions and pleasures is, there is never enough. It doesn't work. We are never satisfied. Never.

It's like putting food into our bodies that doesn't belong there, food that's not really food. All the junk we eat and drink doesn't satisfy. It leaves us craving for more. It even robs our bodies of nutrients!

The other problem with feeding our desires is that our desires begin to take over. In a true story of a rich man befriending one who owned nothing (*Same Kind of Different As Me*), Ron Hall shares some insight. He and his new friend Denver are drinking coffee. Denver stares at Ron's keys sitting on the café table. "I know it aint none of my business, but does you own something that

¹ Story drawn from "Jesus Visits the Hamptons" in Sojourners Magazine, March-April, 2002.

each one of them keys fits?" Ron glanced at his keys, about ten of them. "I suppose I do." He'd never really thought about it before.

"Are you sure you own them, or does they own you?"

Today the fruit we talk about, self-control, is not to be confused with self-discipline. Many people can be extremely self-disciplined, but their lives are still barren. Think of professional athletes, successful business people. When their passion and energy is directed only to their private pursuits, their power base, their portfolio, they are empty.

Are you a slave to your passions, to your things, to your pursuits? Do you control them, or do they control you? Even good things can enslave us: gardening, exercise, car mechanics, the internet, our investment in our children, our cars, our homes.

They enslave us because they consume nearly all our time, energy, and resources. They enslave us because we feel compelled to do them, to take care of them, to upgrade them. We get so wrapped up in them, we don't have time for anything else!

It is much easier to be passionate about the Mavericks or the Cowboys than to be passionate about walking with God and sharing the Good News of what God is doing in our lives.

This is where the fruits of the Spirit come in. Philip Kenneson calls "self-control" the final fruit of the Spirit. When the other fruits are present and active in our lives (love, joy, and peace among them), self-control is a natural result. Self-control happens by default because when we are loving others, there is less room for self. When we are deliberately do things to make peace, the self becomes less important.

Nearly everyone here has had the experience of a break in a friendship or a family relationship. Nearly everyone here has someone or something nagging at them right now, something that needs forgiving, something that needs mending. The thing that often keeps us from loving, from forgiving, from making peace, is our devotion to our self. Our conviction that we are right and they are wrong. Our feelings about our rightness trump our desire to forgive.

There are painful things in life that require us to step outside self. Often we do not have it within ourselves to do this alone. This is where God comes in. God doesn't need much room to get started. Just a chink in the armor. Just a nagging doubt in our minds---"maybe I should. . ." Just a photograph that keeps staring us in the face and giving us a pain in the heart. God can work with any of this. It doesn't happen overnight, but you know if we allow God to

plant seeds, if we allow God's spirit just a little entrée into our lives, enormous benefits will be reaped. You know this happens. You have experienced it.

People who have let this happen know there is some One beyond their own will who makes it happen. People find themselves changed and giving in ways they never thought possible. People find themselves energized and comforted even as they let go of their own comforts.

We do realize, of course, when we allow God's Spirit to plant those seeds, we are no longer in control of what will grow. (We think we are in control but this is illusory, anyway, so we might as well let God do God's thing and get on with it). We don't know where God is going to take us. We have no idea how large this garden is going to get! We don't get to plant strawberries when God wants tomatoes!

We also realize we will have to die to self (we are dying everyday anyway, so we may as well accept it). We will all have to go for smaller barns and fewer keys. Fewer things to encumber us. It doesn't really belong to us, anyway. A wealthy acquaintance recently said to me, "we think we own all this stuff, but it's just rented." Just rented. We have to remember who the Landlord is.

We give up our false sense of choice and our addiction to individualism when we put our faith into action. We sit down at and work with people we never would have rubbed shoulders with before. This is the beauty of Christian community!

We allow ourselves the discomfort of looking at the way we actually LIVE in the bright light of who we say we believe IN. We squirm when someone asks us have we ever thought about this nice house we live in and what it means to be a Christian. We give up the junk food we've been subsisting on and feast instead on the Bread of Life and the Word of God.

All of this sounds hard. It is! But it is also wonderful. It is marvelous, miraculous, really. Is there anything in your life that is truly wonderful that hasn't also been really hard? What is most precious to you? It's not barns, or keys, or houses, or prestige. It's people. But more than that, it's the love of particular people. The love that flows from you to others and back again. That is the thing that points us to God, for God is love. Imagine when we can love even our enemies! Then we know it's got to be God.

This is the deep mystery of how God works. When we let go of self, when we give up, we get so much more than what we thought we wanted. We get to participate in this eons-old journey. We get to live in a house whose walls do not crumble. We get a sense of peace and joy and love that is rarer than a 20 carat diamond. We get in touch with what it means to be truly human, in the best ways we can be human. We get to join the kingdom of believers that

stretches all over the globe in every time and place. We get to taste and see how good---how very, very good---the Lord is. That's something I want with all my heart, and I know, **I know** that's something you want, too.