

THE SMALLEST WORD Luke 12:13-21

INTRODUCTION:

I have to wear corrective lenses because I have eye trouble. I'll bet I'm not the only one here with eye trouble. And I don't mean "E-Y-E trouble". I mean first-person-singular pronoun: "I" trouble. "I" is the smallest word in the English language. The indefinite article "a" and the personal pronoun "I" are both words that can be written with a single letter. But the letter "I" is smaller than the letter "A". I can tell you that from changing the messages on the sign in front of the church. An "I" doesn't take nearly as much space as an "A" does. But I want to talk about the letter "I" for a different reason than the fact that it is not as wide as the letter "A".

As I said before, "I" is the smallest word in the English language – but it is the biggest word in some people's minds. And let me tell you that a person whose mind is filled with "I" is inevitably a small person.

Today's text introduces us to a man with I-trouble. Because of his I-trouble, he did not see things clearly and that led him to make some fatal mistakes.

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; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."*

¹⁶ *And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop."* 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 all my grain and my goods.'* ¹⁹ *And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things 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 anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."*

Having read the parable, it occurs to me that the farmer in the story is afflicted by the same vision problem that I have. I am near-sighted. I can see things close to me but not those things that are far away. The man in the parable is spiritually nearsighted. He can see grain and barns; he can figure yields and profits. What he cannot see is God, his soul or eternity;

what he cannot calculate is that which has lasting worth or brings heavenly reward. He is near-sighted and only sees this world. He has not focused on the next.

I know that the parable is familiar but did you notice the setting? A man called out to Jesus and addressed him as “teacher”. “Teacher,” he said. “Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus addressed the man and rejected the notion that he would play the part of the judge or arbiter between the two brothers.

Then he addressed “**them**” (“*then he said to them*”) and warned them to beware of greediness of any sort. We don’t have anything conclusive to tell us who “them” is. G. Campbell Morgan, in his book *The Parables and Metaphors of Our Lord* believes that “them” refers to the original inquisitor and his brother. There were two people involved in this dispute: two brothers. Morgan believes Jesus was addressing both of them at this point when he warned **them** to beware of greediness of any sort. One brother may have been guilty of greed in not turning over his brother’s share of the inheritance. The other brother may have been guilty of greed in obsessing about the share of the inheritance that was rightfully his but that he had not yet received. Jesus said to beware of greediness of any sort - - greedy for what is **not** rightfully yours or greedy for what **is** rightfully yours. Either way, to obsess about material things is to betray a misunderstanding of what is important in life.

So Jesus gave them a memorable aphorism: “*A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*” The clothes don’t really make the man. You are not really what you eat. Your occupation is not your identity. And the one who dies with the most toys is not necessarily a winner: he may just be dead. “*A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*”

Then Jesus concluded with a parable. He was not just telling a story, he was telling a telling story! On the stage, there is one character and only one. But from somewhere off-stage, at the end of the rich farmer’s soliloquy, the voice of God breaks in and says, “You fool!” It is a serious thing to be called a fool by God. What would make for such a dramatic and drastic appraisal of a man?

I would propose to you that this man was a fool because of three serious mistakes he made as a result of his I-trouble. What makes this parable the text for this morning’s message is that these are three mistakes we will make, too if we suffer from I-trouble.

I. **HE MISTOOK HIS BODY FOR HIS SOUL (12:19a)**

I like the way verse 19 is rendered in the older King James Version of the Bible. In that translation, the verse reads: ¹⁹ *And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.*

I like that phrasing because it much more accurately reflects the Greek text in which these verses were originally written. Where the New International Version reads, "I'll say to myself, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry" the Greek reads, "I'll say to my Ψυχη, Ψυχη, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years." The word Ψυχη is the word most often translated "soul". For instance, when we are told to love the Lord with our heart, soul, mind and strength, the word for soul is Ψυχη.

I prefer the translation of the King James Version because I believe it captures the essence of the problem. The man said, "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have certainly made abundant provision for yourself for many years to come.'" And that's the point. He hadn't made any provision for his soul. None at all.

Back in verse 15, Jesus had given the two brothers an aphorism to live by when he told them that a man's life does not consist of the abundance of his stuff. A person is not the same as the sum total of his possessions.

This man was a fool because he mistook his body for his soul and having made material provision for his body, he thought he was provided for.

In my line of work, I've often stood beside people who were dying and who knew it. I've never had a person say to me, "I sure wish I'd made more money." Or, "I sure wish I'd bought a more expensive car, a bigger house or more jewelry." I've never even had anyone say to me, "I wish I had more life insurance." But I have often had people tell me that they wish they had made better provision for their souls.

When we stand before our Maker, as we all one day will, our bottom line will not be our bottom line. Our bottom line is going to be, "has the debt for your sin been paid?" If we make provision for our soul, Jesus pays the debt of our sin; he picks up the tab for our taste of the forbidden fruit; his sacrificial death makes up for our selfish lives.

The solo character in our tragedy was a fool because he mistook his body for his soul. He had provided material goods for his body but made no mention of any spiritual provision for his soul. A soul is not rich just because a wallet is and he is a fool who thinks otherwise.

II. HE MISTOOK TIME FOR ETERNITY (12:19b)

The second fatal mistake made by our rich farmer is that he mistook time for eternity. He said to his soul, "Soul, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."

But who was to say that his soul had many years left to enjoy anything? The man may have known a lot about farming but he didn't know much about living. He does not seem to have learned that life is uncertain but death is not.

- We sing: "***This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through***" but we live like we are going to spend eternity right here.
- We say, "***My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue***" but, in fact, all our treasures are our earthly goods.
- We intone, "***The angels beckon me from heaven's open door***" but we act as if we don't believe that summons will ever come for us.
- We conclude "***And I can't feel at home in this world anymore***" but we are perfectly at home in this world and behave as if we believe it will be forever more.

Provision for now does not equal provision for eternity.

He said to himself, "Take life easy. Eat drink and be merry." But that is not the goal of living. If our focus is on the here and now, we want to take life easy, we want to eat well, drink hearty and have a merry old time.

But if the goal is the hereafter, we know that ease, food, beverage and a good time are not what we are here after. We are here to become conformed to the likeness of the image of the Son of God (Romans 8:29),

None of us knows when we will leave this earth but each of us will. He is a fool who lives as if this were his home.

III. **HE MISTOOK HIMSELF FOR GOD (12:19c)**

The third fatal mistake the rich farmer made was to mistake himself for God. He thought he could determine his own destiny by his own efforts. He believed that his estimation of his own success was the determining one. It is not. In the end, he doesn't even have a vote.

Self-satisfaction is no standard for determining our eternal state.

When I ministered in Minneapolis, I led Bible studies in the dorms at the University of Minnesota. I frequently had skeptical students who would take satisfaction from their doubts and say, "If I were God, I'd be pleased with those people who ask the hard questions, demand proof and refuse to accept anything on the basis of faith." But their sentences began not just with the hypothetical but with the absurd: "If I were God." But you are not. "If I were a horse, I wouldn't mind being ridden." "If I were the

president, I'd fix Social Security." "If I were Tony LaRusa, I'd..." But that's the point: I'm not. And I'm not God, either. I don't write the rules and it is senseless to speculate about how I'd write them if I were God. I'm not and I never will be. Nor will you.

Nor would our rich farmer in the parable.

CONCLUSION:

In his book *Dangers, Toils and Snares*, John Ortberg writes: When we take our children to the shrine of the Golden Arches, they always lust for the meal that comes with a cheap little prize, a combination christened, in a moment of marketing genius, the Happy Meal. You're not just buying fries, McNuggets, and a dinosaur stamp; you're buying happiness. Their advertisements have convinced my children they have a little McDonald-shaped vacuum in their souls: "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in a happy meal."

I try to buy off the kids sometimes. I tell them to order only the food and I'll give them a quarter to buy a little toy on their own. But the cry goes up, "I want a Happy Meal." All over the restaurant, people crane their necks to look at the tight-fisted, penny-pinching cheapskate of a parent who would deny a child the meal of great joy.

The problem with the Happy Meal is that the happy wears off, and they need a new fix. No child discovers lasting happiness in just one: "Remember that Happy Meal? What great joy I found there!"

Happy Meals bring happiness only to McDonalds. You ever wonder why Ronald McDonald wears that grin? Twenty billion Happy Meals, that's why.

Do you know what? When you get older, you don't get any smarter; your happy meals just get more expensive.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a story about a successful peasant farmer who was not satisfied with his lot. He wanted more of everything.

One day he received a novel offer. For 1000 rubles, he could buy all the land he could walk around in a day. The only catch in the deal was that he had to be back at his starting point by sundown. Early the next morning he started out walking at a fast pace. By midday he was very tired, but he kept going, covering more and more ground. Well into the afternoon he realized that his greed had taken him far from the starting point.

He quickened his pace and as the sun began to sink low in the sky, he

began to run, knowing that if he did not make it back by sundown the opportunity to become an even bigger landholder would be lost. As the sun began to sink below the horizon he came within sight of the finish line. Gasping for breath, his heart pounding, he called upon every bit of strength left in his body and staggered across the line just before the sun disappeared.

He immediately collapsed, blood streaming from his mouth. In a few minutes he was dead. Afterwards, his servants dug a grave. It was not much over six feet long and three feet wide.

The title of Tolstoy's story was: "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" The answer is, just about 3 by 6 and about 6 feet deep. Let's pray that God will open our eyes to see the truth about time and about eternity.

INVITATION: #563 – *"Open My Eyes That I May See"*