

**Matthew 6:24-34
Creekside COB
May 25, 2008**

“Stuff”

Years ago, caged canaries were a common and necessary accessory in coalmines. Canaries have a highly sensitive metabolism. When a canary died in a mineshaft it signaled the presence of deadly methane and carbon monoxide, and alerted the miners to evacuate. These little winged sentinels saved the lives of many miners.

Today, the decline and disappearance of species of insects, birds, and plants are signaling that something is wrong in our environment. They are an early warning system alerting us to dangers, which must be dealt with now.

Today I will identify a sign that things are out of kilter in our culture. Two weeks ago, on the outskirts of the village of Birchwood, Wisconsin, population 518, I saw a dead canary. You couldn't miss it. Nothing changes much in Birchwood. It takes quite a while for new trends to make their way to this quiet little village. The canary wasn't there last year, but there it was on County Road F -- two rows of self-storage units.

In addition to all the other crises impacting our world, the Wall Street Journal recently identified another -- the storage crisis. We've run out of places to store all of our stuff. The size of families has decreased since 1970, but the size of the average house has increased by 40%! The hyper-houses popping up across Elkhart County with their walk-in closets, cavernous basements, and three car garages still aren't big enough to hold all of our stuff.

The comedian George Carlin performed a routine that exposes America's addiction to things. He says that life is all about accumulating stuff, then finding a place to put it. A house is a

pile of stuff with a lid on it. We're protective of our stuff. We lock it up and install security systems so we won't have to worry about someone stealing our stuff -- like the fourth grade math test we've kept for forty years.

Secure in the knowledge that our stuff is safe, we go out and buy more stuff. Vacations are challenging because we have to decide what stuff to bring along. We pick it, pack it, and when we get to where we're going we unpack it and put our stuff in the places where it belongs. There's bathroom stuff, drawer stuff, and closet stuff, and after it's unpacked we realize there is a problem. There are more places than our stuff can fill, so we must go out and buy more stuff to fill it!

Moving is a back-breaker and an eye-opener. When Sue and I moved, the number of things we've collected over the years astounded us. Lots of boxes have yet to be opened because we don't know where to put everything. More than once we've asked each other, "Do we really need all this stuff?" Without saying the word, we both know the answer.

An anthropology professor at the University of California did a study of our consumer society. She writes, "*Twenty-first century American is the most materially saturated society in global history.*" As I read her conclusions this statement jumped off the page for me -- "Finding a place to store all our material possessions has become 'an overwhelming burden' for most middle class families." This explains why storage facilities are growing like housing developments, and not even Birchwood, Wisconsin is exempt!

We are burdened by and buried under mountains of stuff. Christians and those who are not have a *consumption addiction*. The more we get, the more we want. The more we get, the deeper our dissatisfaction grows. Advertising has conditioned us to equate happiness with acquisition, and has given us a bad case of what Tony Campolo calls, *affluenza*.

In the closing verses of last Sunday's lesson from Matthew, Jesus ordered the disciples to *make more disciples*. "Take my

message to all the nations. Teach my commandments -- be salt and leaven and light. Transform the world by demonstrating what life is like lived by the principles of God's kingdom." The trouble is, the world does not take kindly to kingdoms with competing claims. Long ago the world learned that the best way to neutralize the influence of the church is not by threatening it, but by seducing it.

There's no denying that you have been seduced. I have been seduced. The American church has been seduced. We are wedded to stuff. We're not conscious of it, but our possessions give us a sense of identity. When you visit Sue and me, you will see paintings, photographs, and carvings of birds and other wildlife all around the house. Our home has a nature theme. The things we display say something about who we are. The things we collect express our love of God's gift of nature and the pleasure it brings.

The things we are attached to give us our sense of identity. But we get into trouble when we feel we lack something. Advertisements push a product, and we buy it. Months later another version with more *power*, more *memory*, and more *speed* comes along. Suddenly we're not satisfied with what we've got, so off we go to replace it.

We've been seduced with chronic dissatisfaction to the point that we no longer own our possessions -- they own us!

Our overabundance of stuff doesn't just create a storage issue but a spiritual issue. There are some things that cannot be done. Jim Croce sang, "*You can't pull on Superman's cape, and you can't spit into the wind.*" Arabs have a saying, "There are two things that cannot be done -- retrieve the spent arrow and the spoken word. We've heard the expression, "You can't get blood out of a turnip," and "You can't fight city hall." And Jesus said:

“You can’t worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you’ll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can’t worship God and money both. (Matthew 6:24 The Message)

The “prosperity gospel” that is so popular these days teaches that God wants us to be materially blessed. Love God by giving to God and he’ll see to it that you get the good stuff. The slick, pinned-striped preachers who preach this nonsense misuse the Bible in a ways that oppose the overall biblical teaching about material wealth. The Bible affirms the good that money can do to help the poor, alleviate suffering, fight injustice, and expand the reach of Christ’s church. But it warns us that our stuff can separate us from God.

It is not necessarily a curse to be wealthy nor is it a virtue to be poor. Proverbs 30:8 says, *“Give me neither poverty nor riches... lest I be full and deny you, or lest I be poor and steal in the name of my God.”* Having things is not a sin. Stuff is value neutral, but not what it does to our relationship to our first love. If we are not careful, using things and loving people turns to loving things and using people.

Jesus not only understood the perils of possessions. He understood what drives the desire that makes us rich in things and poor in soul. The reason we bury money and all it buys deep inside our chests is ANXIETY. These anxious days we’re living in rub off on us. What if gas hits \$5 a gallon? What will happen if we’re in a long recession? What if our house doesn’t sell? What if the stock market slump keeps on taking big bites out of my investments? *What if we don’t have enough money to run the church?*

When we’re anxious we draw in on ourselves and refuse to go into the world to make disciples, teach the love of Jesus, and baptize people into his Kingdom. When we’re anxious we curl up into fetal balls and whimper, “We can’t! We don’t have the means. We hold tight to what we’ve got or we’ll lose it.” We are

unsure there's a safety net beneath us. Better be safe than sorry. Better see to our own security. And before you know it, trust is grounded in goods instead of the goodness of God. An anxious Christian is an oxymoron.

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life and what you shall eat or drink or wear. Isn't your life about more than food and clothes?” Jesus said that. There's an important word in this passage -- LOOK. In the Greek, the word that is translated “look” is emphatic and strong. **“LOOK HERE, PEOPLE! Open your eyes and look INTENSLY.”** What did Jesus say we are supposed to look at? Not numbers. Not Dow Jones and NASDAQ. Not the gas pump. Not the headlines. Not the next thing to roll off the assembly line.

He said, **“LOOK at the birds of the air. They don't plow, plant, reap and store their crop in four-story silos, yet God feeds them. Doesn't God value you more than a goldfinch? Are you anxious that last summer's wardrobe will be out of style this summer? LOOK at the lilies of the field. They don't try to out-fashion the daisies. But not even Solomon dressed to the nines could beat a lily in a beauty contest. If God cares for birds and flowers, doesn't God care even more for you, his children?”**

Dan Gilbert is a psychologist at Harvard. He studied what it takes to make people happy. Here is what he discovered: **“Once you have enough to meet the basic needs of food and shelter, incremental increases of wealth and material possessions have little effect on happiness.”** Duh!!

D. H. Lawrence wrote a story called, **“The Rocking Horse Winner.”** It is the story of a family that was always desperate for money and lived way beyond its means. The little boy in the family named Paul accidentally discovered that if he raced his rocking horse, the names of winning racehorses would mysteriously pop into his head. The family had a goldmine in Paul's ability to name winning horses. His gift won the family race after race, and money flowed like a river into their bank account. But their fabulous wealth didn't satisfy. The more they won, the more they wanted. The more they won, the harder and

faster they pushed little Paul to rock his horse. In the end, the attempt to satisfy their appetite for money caused Paul to die of exhaustion on his rocking horse.

We can't have it all and have a committed relationship with God. We can serve God *with* money, but we cannot serve God *and* money. What the world calls "the good life" with *stuff overflowing* isn't simply incompatible with Jesus. It is hostile to Jesus. The more we have for ourselves, the more leftovers there are for Jesus and the mission of his church.

How much of our time do we spend thinking about stuff? How much energy goes into the protection and upkeep of things compared to the time we intentionally spend with our Maker? Do we care more about nice things or broken people? I'll leave it up to you to sort out the implications.

A Quaker farmer posted a sign by the road that said: "Free Land -- 40 Acres." But the line below gave a condition. "Free Land -- to the person with a satisfied heart and mind." A passerby read the sign and raced up the lane to the farmer's house. He approached the old Quaker and said, "I saw your sign and I'm here to get the free land." "Did thee read the condition?" the farmer asked. "Indeed I did," the inquirer replied. "My heart and mind are content, and I want for nothing." And the Quaker asked, "*Then why dost thee want the land?*"