

## SERMON - Tear Down Those Barns, Luke 12:16-21, November 18, 2018

The question of whether giving or receiving gives people a greater sense of happiness was the subject of a controlled scientific experiment conducted by the social psychologist Liz Dunn and her colleagues. They gave students at the University of British Columbia an envelope containing money and told them that they either (1) had to spend the money on themselves before 5 p.m. that day or (2) had to spend the money on someone else before 5 p.m. Those who gifted for others were happier than those who gifted for themselves.

In some cases, there were 5 dollars in the envelope and in other cases there were 20 dollars. The amount didn't matter -- the results were the same. Spending on others made people happier than spending on oneself. Ironically, when asked to predict which outcome would make one happier (i.e., spending on oneself or spending on others), another group of students at the same university thought spending on themselves would make them happier than spending on others. In short, people's selfish assumptions were proven wrong when they actually had the opportunity to give to others than to oneself.

St Basil, like St John Chrysostom and other Church Fathers, believed that whatever one has that is over and above one's needs should be given to those who have less. But this is complicated by the human tendency to adjust the definition of "need" to fit one's current level of income. Those who have more tend to use more. St Basil treats this subject in his sermon, *I Will Tear Down My Barns*, which deals with the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12: 16-21) who, on the very day he was to die, said to himself that he will tear down his barns and build larger ones to store his goods. St Basil regards this tearing down of the barns to build larger ones as a metaphor for expanding the baseline of need. "Barn" represents our definition of need, what we think we need to live. St Basil says that if we never have any extra to share, it is because we adjust our definition of need to suit our situation.

This is why wealth can so easily become an obstacle to love and salvation. Our definition of need becomes distorted, and we begin to see luxury and excess as a necessity, overlooking the abject poverty and genuine need and deprivation of others, favoring our own comfort and abundant wealth over the most basic needs of our fellow human beings. How many times do we read in the lives of the saints who owned a tin cup, a can for cooking and boiling water, one cassock, one riassa, a prayer rope, and perhaps one or two books, such as the Holy Scriptures or a good spiritual book, such as the *Philokalia* or the *Sayings of St. Isaac the Syrian*. This is all they needed, this is all they wanted. Anything above this was considered excessive and sinful to own. How many times do we look around our homes in amazement at all the stuff we've accumulated over the years. If we are blessed to live to old age, and if one day we have to downsize and move into smaller living quarters or into an assisted living facility, all of a sudden this lifetime of possessions becomes no longer needed by us. This begs the question, how much of our accumulated possessions were ever needed in the first place? "Do not store for yourselves treasure on earth, which rusts and decays and which thieves break into and steal. But store for yourselves treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also". It is fitting that as we are preparing to celebrate the Nativity of our Savior for us to be reminded not to lose sight of the value of giving to others. May the spirit of service and giving to others be with us not only during these holy days, but throughout the year, always and at all times. Amen.