

Off the treadmill: Luke 12:13-21

by [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

The Christian faith is never lived, taught or preached in a vacuum. There is always an alternative to it: another philosophy, another religion, another ideal. "I see that you have many gods," Paul noted when he looked around first-century Athens, and indeed the Greeks had a god for everything: for wealth, beauty, fertility, immortality, warfare and more. Statues of the gods were constructed to communicate permanence and power. The gods helped people orient their lives toward achieving these ends: becoming wealthy, healthy and beautiful and avoiding death.

Most Christians have come to terms intellectually with the idea that there is only one God. But the gods that our ancestors worshiped die a slow death, and even though we live in a supposedly Christian nation and a supposedly Judeo-Christian Western culture, their influence is still with us, and it has everything to do with having "the good life."

The remote control guides us to visible signs of that life: *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *The Apprentice*, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*; or we can watch a music video or wander around at the local shopping mall.

The culture saturates our thinking about the good life, and we are hooked by it. We are like my younger daughter's pet hamster. I don't know quite how or why we ever welcomed a hamster into our home. While more astute pastoral theologians are birdwatchers, I watch a hamster in its cage. Wade is sometimes turning a plastic wheel and at other times gnawing on whatever's available. Like our hamster, we humans are hooked by whatever is presented to us. And in our culture, the vision is of the good life. "You will be happy if you are wealthy, if you are beautiful, if you express your sexuality in any way that feels good, if you are young and healthy, if you are secure." This is the good life.

But there is a problem: in the pursuit of the good life we become hamsters on a never-ending wheel of motion, moving at a pace that gets more and more difficult to sustain. Jesus responded to our dilemma with a parable about a greedy farmer who was compelled to tear down his barn and build a larger one. Replace the word *barn*

with *house* and you are describing the McMansions that dot our suburban landscapes.

Sometimes we see the good life in what we imagine our neighbor's life to be. We compare ourselves to others and say, "They are really making it." Of course, this is the deadly sin of envy, a form of greed influenced by our vision of the good life. "Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions," Jesus teaches. The good life turns out to be something we have substituted for the real thing: the blessed life. We have laid up treasures for ourselves; it is a way of life that leads to insecurity and anxiety. Most young adults sense that their world will not be as prosperous as the one their parents lived in; they are aware of the national debt and our economy's degradation of the environment. Ironically, our gods cannot withstand the winds and waves of the surrounding ethos, and thus our human construction of the good life must be ensured, gated, secured and shielded. New occupations have been created as a result.

Jesus suggests seeking the blessed life, one in which we are "rich toward God." It is clear that we must let go of the good life in order to receive the blessed life (Matthew gives this teaching more attention in the Sermon on the Mount). Augustine said it well: "God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them."

Should the pastor choose to preach on this text about the blessed life in front of a typical North American congregation, he or she will have 20, perhaps 30 minutes of the people's attention. (Yes, I'm optimistic!) Over the course of the next three days, these same persons will hear over 20 hours of messages about the good life, most of those messages presented in short and easily digestible sound bites.

Here are a few short thoughts offered in contrast to the cultural messages:

Live more simply. We can obsess into the night about wanting to possess something, or worry about preserving it or protecting it. The poor are not burdened with these obstacles, and the truly rich person is wise in the knowledge that this is not what life is all about.

Enjoy the harvest, and share it with others. The poor have a place at our tables and in our hospitals, our schools, our nation and our lives because they are children of our heavenly Father. "God gives," the Haitian proverb reminds us, "but he does not share." The Creator is the source of all blessings, but we are given the responsibility

of dividing and distributing them.

Offer and give thanks for signs of the blessed life around us: a young girl who plays the violin for an elderly neighbor, a family that establishes a foundation so that an immigrant student can complete his education, a community that develops and implements a plan for preserving open spaces.

Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem, but along the way there were obstacles, among them money and possessions and how these were to be distributed (as in the question posed by the greedy farmer). The same issues are present in local congregations when we attempt to arrive at a budget and in movements shaped by global cries for justice (the Millennium Development Goals movement, the One Campaign).

Jesus stands in our midst and reminds us that we are not here to build bigger barns. We are here to seek an alternative life, a blessed life.