

Overstuffed barns

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue



Thinkstock

My house doesn't look anything like a barn. It's painted beige, not red. A loft that juts out over the family room contains accumulated things, but no bales of hay. What you will find in my house is what you may find in your own—a lot of stuff. A person with few possessions looking at my residence could mistake it for one of the barns belonging to that rich man Jesus talked about. Remember his situation? He didn't know his soul was buried beneath all those bushels of corn and sorghum.

George Carlin, in his irreverent monologue on stuff, lays bare his definition of a house. "Your house is nothin' but a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time. So that's all your house is. It's just a pile of stuff with a cover on it."

Few Americans will argue with the idea that we are a nation of consumers. We all know we need certain products to live comfortably. But as we race to keep pace with our neighbors, the distinction between needs and wants blurs quickly. A need in contemporary America, commentator George Will once observed, is often little more than a 48-hour-old want. Our closets accumulate stuff. Bedroom shelves sag from plenitude. Household items lose their ability to "spark joy" (see MaryAnn McKibben Dana, ["The joy of stuff"](#)). Before we know it, our dwelling place becomes indistinguishable from an overstocked barn.

We don't learn easily how to disencumber ourselves of stuff. One would hope that in growing older we might gain fresh wisdom from the experience of the rich fool who

needed bigger barns. But the seductive nature of consumption is difficult to shed. A sardonic New Yorker cartoon depicts this memorably. A despondent man on his deathbed mutters to his son (or is it his pastor?), who is holding his hand, "I should have bought more crap."

Jesus tells a crowd that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. I'm convinced that we confuse possessions with treasures. Moth and rust go after possessions; they can't touch treasures. I possess my house; I treasure my home. I possess food in the fridge; I treasure nourishment. I possess a cell phone; I treasure connecting with people. I possess a car; I treasure the freedom it offers. I possess a heart; I treasure love.

"Shame our wanton selfish gladness; rich in things and poor in soul." So go the hymn lyrics of Harry Emerson Fosdick, who notably used the word *shame* to name our infatuation with possessions.

Full barns do not equal full souls. As hard as this truth is to absorb, until we figure out a way to take it to heart, we will never enjoy what Jesus invites us to become: rich toward God.