

## ***Clutching Too Tightly***

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Hosea 11:1-11 / Luke 12:13-21

*“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.”*

### *Movement 1 – The Drive for Success*

We like to live well. We like to enjoy life. We like to relish in the finer things, we enjoy a good meal, a well-made car, or a nice piece of furniture to sit in. We like to live well.

If you remember *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, one of the driving forces of their life of crime was to live well. They would hold up a train, they would rob the train, take the money and then live in a lavish style, buying unnecessary items such as a bicycle. This was the goal and the focus of their life, to live well. Butch Cassidy’s whole ambition, his vision for what to do in each chapter in his life was focused on getting enough money to support the lifestyle he desired. Do you remember when he was with the Sundance Kid and he claimed in a grandiose fashion, “I have vision and the rest of the world wears bifocals”? He had vision for ways to earn, to steal, to find and to make money so that he and Sundance could live well.

We watch these movies and we can relate to this desire, this urge to want to live well. The “get rich quick” schemes captivate us, because we would like to indulge in such a scheme if it seemed plausible and possible. If we were to receive a check with no strings attached, we would take it in a second. We want to get rich so that we can live well. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said in his work *Function of Reason* that people want to live, and then want to live well and they want to live better. We get to a point and we look for the way to move to the next point, the next level and continue to do better in our life.

We like to live well, and we have ways of measuring the good life. We have ways of determining if we are indeed living well or if we are struggling. We look at someone’s clothes, someone’s possessions, or someone’s home and judge, based on appearance, if that person does or does not live well. If someone is driving an 86’ Civic, we assume that the individual is not living well and must be struggling. But if someone is driving a 08’ Lexus, Mercedes, or Porsche, then that individual must be living well.

If someone is living in a large home or is in a nice neighborhood then the person must be living well. If the job is with a well-known company or in an “acceptable” high powered, white collared position then the person must be living well.

The Israelites were constantly trying to compete, to keep up with, and maybe get ahead of their neighbors who were seen as living well. Their neighbors had a powerful king, and they wanted a king. Their neighbors had a god that was touted as a violent, war-like god, and they wanted a part of that god. It seemed that their neighbors, Egypt and Assyria were doing well. These were large and powerful countries with great wealth and respect in their corner of the world. The Israelites wanted to live well, so they started to try to mimic, to borrow, and to adapt the lifestyle, religious practices and ideals of their neighbors. They wanted to live well.

We want to live well, and we base the “fine life” on the things we can acquire, the things we can surround ourselves with and the things we can show to others. We want to live well, and the good life is defined for us by society, our neighbors and our friends. We want to live well and we look to the tangible, the empirical to decide if we are on the right track.

What will be a determining factor for whether or not this service goes well? The attendance will to a great measure influence our impression of the service. What is a determining

factor for a church that is doing well? If the church is growing in members and financially then we assume that the church is doing well.

We want to live well, and we run like rats in a maze trying to get stuff, trying to find our blessings, and trying to surround ourselves with things that will show that we are living well. We want to live well. We want to enjoy life, and we try to collect, gain, and gather things that will help us to live well.

### *Movement 2 – Showered with Blessings*

Sometimes things go well. Sometimes fortune smiles upon us. Sometimes we find ourselves walking on the “sunny side of the street.” Sometimes things go well.

The rich man in Jesus’ parable hit a stroke of good luck. Maybe he changed the fertilizer he was using. Maybe he purchased his seed from a different supplier. Maybe the rain was just right that year. Maybe he timed everything in just a perfect way so that he could get a good harvest. We don’t know what he did, but the land of the rich man produced abundantly. The land was blessed and the rich man was blessed. Things went well.

We know those folks who happen into blessings. A good year in the stock market and someone has a little more disposable income than normal. A lucky break with a meeting and someone lands a job that is very lucrative and fruitful. Picking the right numbers and the lottery actually makes a dream come true (thousands of dollars worth of lottery tickets later). Sometimes things go well and we happen into blessings.

A friend of mine has been the pastor of a church for about three years, and things are going well. Things are moving well, his church is growing, his presence in the community is becoming more and more noticeable, and he is reaping fruit from his work (which is a nice way of saying that he is getting more money). He did not do anything different. He did not try any boxed plan for growth, but his church is growing. Things are going well for him and his church. Things are going well.

We look at those churches that find the “holy grail” of church growth, those churches that find the right niche, and we say, sometimes through clenched teeth, it is great that things are going well. In his classic book, *Dracula*, Bram Stoker wrote, “How blessed are some people, whose lives have no fears, no dread; to whom sleep is a blessing that comes nightly, and brings nothing but sweet dreams.” We know those people who have been blessed.

Yet we are those people. We have been blessed. Things have gone well for us because we have been named by the Lord, we are claimed by the Lord and we are led by the Lord. The beginning of the passage in Hosea is a reminder of God’s blessings to the people of Israel. Like a loving parent, guiding, helping and caring for a child, God guided, cared for, helped and loved Israel. God led the people out of Egypt; God led them with cords of love and kindness. God held them in the divine embrace. Things have gone well for the Israelites by the grace of God.

Things have gone well for the rich man by the grace of God. From God came the rain and the sun. From God came the blessings that added to his life. Things have gone well because of God.

We have blessings that we can see and we cannot see. We are living a life that is graced by the Lord. We should be able to say, no matter where we are that we have another day to love the Lord, so things are going well. The opportunities to see the smile of a child, the food in our belly, the stability with which we are blessed ultimately come from God. In a world where financial stability is precarious, is one sickness, one natural disaster, one accident away, we can

recognize how what we have comes from the Lord. Things are going well in our lives, whether we recognize it or not through the grace of, the actions of and the love of God.

### *Movement 3 – Clutching to Tightly*

And we would like things to continue to go well. We would like the good life to continue. We would like the niceties of our lives to carry us into eternity. We would like things to continue to go well. So we find ways to hold onto our blessings. The rich man found himself with an abundance of crops. He found himself with more blessings than he expected and he was faced with a quandary, how could he hold onto his prosperity? How could he maintain his stability? How could he continue to assure that things would go well? If he left things alone, then the excess of his crops might spoil. He had a surplus that could not be sold all at once (there is a current Farm Bill that addresses a similar problem). He had so many vegetables that he did not know what to do with them, and he could not be assured that next year would garner the same results. He could not be sure that he would again and again fall into the same blessings. So he had to figure out a way to hold onto his blessings. He had to figure out a way to clutch onto them so that he could continue his fine living and his prosperity. He tore down his barns and built up larger ones so that he could store his grains and his goods. Like holding all of his belongings in tightly clenched fists, he held onto his possessions so that he would never be without the blessings, and the fine living that he so deeply enjoyed. He wanted things to continue to go well, and did all that he could to ensure that things would go well.

My friend that I told you about is facing a similar situation. The church is not quite sure what to do with the blessings they are experiencing. The people are not quite sure how to react to all the new people. They want to continue to grow. They want to continue to do well and live well. So they have entered into an intense period of self-examination. They are finding out why it is that people have been attracted to this particular congregation. They want to name the reasons people have been drawn so that they can claim those reasons, focus on those reasons and continue to practice the particularities that draw people in. If it is the music, they nobody better change the music. If it is the location, then they should focus on the location. If it is the preaching then keep the preaching just as it is. If it is the Sunday school classes, then put the teachers in a box so that they may never change. This church wants to find the reasons things are going well, and keep those things the same so that the church can continue to do well. They want to build barns to put their traditions, their practices in, store them and take care of them so that they will be present for years to come. Clutching tightly to the traditions and the practices that feeds the congregation, the church looks to continue to do well.

We want things to continue to go well. We clutch tightly to what we have and focus on continuing our blessings. We worship our successes, we walk with a nervous and anxious pride, and we build barns for our glory. Think of Chautauqua. It is an amazing place. It is a place where people can hear great music, where people can enjoy great speakers, and where there is an ambiance of a time that has past. This place is a blessing in many ways, and what have we surrounded this place with? There is a fence that keeps change, challenges, and threats out so that we can stay in and continue to enjoy the blessing that we have. We have, for years and years, clutched tightly to the blessing of this place.

Think of the church. The church is mired in the 1950s because that was a time of blessing. Yet we have surrounded the church of 1950 with walls and gates so that it will never change and we can continue to enjoy the blessings we received decades ago. We fence off our blessings and claim them as our own. The theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr makes the claim that

humanity has forgotten its source and its creator. Niebuhr is making the anthropological claim that humanity, when it falls into pride, forgets that all things come from God and belong to God. It is our pride that drives us to build fences. It is our belief that our blessings are ours that drive us to build walls and put locks on doors. We want things to go well, and we are trying to do everything we can to assure that things will continue to go well.

#### *Movement 4 – Stacking up our Despair*

In building our barns, we can shut people out. We can close off relationships, we can turn our back on others, and we can shut people out. When we clutch so tightly we squeeze out life. When we clutch so tightly we crush the spark of our own lives. When we clutch so tightly we break down our relationships with loved ones, our friends and even lose our God.

Charles Foster Kane was someone who yearned for power, for wealth and for fame. He searched for and sought a better life, and when he found it, he desired more and more. He held on tightly to his media empire, he held on tightly to his possession and even to his wife. When he died he was without friends, without family, and ultimately alone. When he died he was heard uttering a symbol of his childhood, holding a glass snow globe and yearning for a different life. He held on to tightly and began to stack up his own despair in his loneliness and isolation. He held on to tightly and strangled himself slowly.

When we hold on we take the same risks. When we hold on, we take the risk of shutting others out. When we focus so much on the possession we have earned, the blessings that we have received we begin to isolate others. We begin to offer more affection to our car than to our spouse. We begin to offer more attention to our home than to our children. We begin to devote more energy to our liturgy than to our Lord. We clutch so tightly that we strangle ourselves from all other relationships. It is just like when a child gets a new toy and isolates him or herself for the sake of protecting that toy.

The people in Israel clutched too tightly to an idea. The Lord called to them, pleaded with them, and they continued to chase after the ideals of Baal, the cultures of a foreign land, and the wealth of others. They continued to chase after the power and prestige of other countries, and ended up slowly strangling themselves from the Lord.

We can clutch so tightly that we only find ourselves stacking up our despair in our own isolation. Our desire of doing well, of staying well, and of living well put us in a place of isolation. How many churches have split because some clutch too tightly to old and dusty traditions? How many individuals have been hurt because “Christians” have put the building over the individual? How many have been turned away from Christ because they have only received hate and fear from the guards of the cross clutching tightly to the glitz and glitter of the crosses they have built? We clutch so tightly that we shut out others; we isolate others, and slowly strangle ourselves.

This is a danger we all face. When we continue to build up our walls, our barns, and our places of protection and control we begin to shut others out, to isolate and to slowly, slowly strangle ourselves. In clutching to tightly we lose our own lives.

#### *Movement 5 – Naming our Gifts*

Our gifts are from the Lord. What we receive, that which we count as blessings are not ours, but are from the Lord. Our gifts are from the Lord.

If you have a good crop, recognize that the food is not yours, but is a gift and a blessing from God. If you have a good year financially, recognize that the money is not yours, but a

blessing from God. If you have a gift or a talent for music, or writing, or speaking, or whatever, realize that this gift is not yours but a blessing from God. All that we have is a blessing from God, and belongs to God.

The rich man had a good year, an abundant year, and his reaction was to store his goods. Never did he acknowledge God's actions. Never did he acknowledge the blessing of the Lord. Never did he ask what he should do to show God his grace and thankfulness. Instead he hoarded and claimed those gifts as his own.

The Israelites were blessed with a country. They were blessed with the guiding hand of God, and yet they claimed the nation as their own. They claimed the land as their own, and did not offer any thanks to the Lord. The Israelites and the rich man did not acknowledge their gifts as blessings from the Lord.

So often I hear pastors talk about "their" ministry and "their" church, as if they owned it. So often I hear parishioners talk about "their" pastor and "their" church as if they owned it. I hear things like, "this is our service, this is our building, and this is my bible." Yet they aren't ours. We can't place ownership on the Holy Word. We can't control worship. We can't claim the church as our own. No, we need to name all of these things as belonging to the Lord. We are to shake down the barns, shake down the walls, tear down the gates and give back our gifts to the Lord. Let the Bible belong to God. Let God lead us in engaging the word, not the rabid antics of a handful of pastors. Let the Lord guide us in worship, not the ghosts of years past. Let the Holy Spirit build, design and shape the church, not the worldly assumptions and projections of what a church is "supposed" to look like and be. These things are the Lord's, and it is only right for us to return them to the Lord.

The feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruther talks about a disorientation of direction that leads towards such a desire to claim and capture the blessings of the Lord. She claims that we have lost our point of view in what we have received from the Lord, and that often leads towards a desire and demand for power, wealth, and control.

Yet as soon as we name the gifts we have as blessings from the Lord, then we have to let go. As soon as we name the grace that showers upon us as grace that comes from God, then we have to let go. All that you have, all that you are comes from God, is from God, and should lead us back to God. Take the gift you have received, wrap it back up in the paper, put the bow back on the top and return it humbly and meekly to God. Our gifts come from the Lord.

#### *Movement 6 – Clutching to the Lord*

Let us always remember to clutch to the cross. This is what we are called to hold onto. This is what we are to cling to, desire and claim. Claim the cross, embrace the cross and stay with the cross.

Do you remember the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? Do you remember the story of how this outcaste Lutheran Pastor left the Germany of the Third Reich, how he came to the United States with so many other great minds from Europe to seek a safety and sanctuary. He came here so that he could live a good life, a comfortable life and continue to serve the Lord. Yet while he was in the States his heart was troubled. His freedom was not his. His safety was not his, and he returned it to the Lord. He went back to Germany, not clutching tightly to his safety, his freedom, or his even his life. He went back to Germany clutching to the cross. He held onto the cross when he made the difficult choice to take part in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He continued to hold onto that cross when he helped Jews get out of Germany and into freedom. He embraced the cross when he was arrested and taken to prison. And on that fateful day, when he was led to

the gallows, his eyes were on the cross, he was ready to mount the cross and make that his life. He was clutching to the cross.

Let go of your gifts, let go of your possessions and clutch to the cross. Live your life as if it belongs to the Lord and hold onto the cross. Use your gifts as if they are not your own, and hold onto the cross.

Live your life not proclaiming your success, and your possession, but proclaiming the gospel.

Live your life not touting what you have, but what you have gained through Christ.

Live your life, not showing off your gifts, but showing off the love and the grace of God.

Live your life as if it is not your own, but the Lord's.

Live your life singing and proclaiming the glory of the Lord.

Hold on tightly to the cross. Clutch to the cross and live that life through the cross.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King once preached what he wanted to be said in his funeral. He said that when he dies he doesn't want anyone to talk about his degrees. He doesn't want anyone to talk about his accomplishments, his Nobel peace prize, or anything else that he has earned. Instead, King said that what he wanted was for people to say that he clothed the naked, that he fed the hungry, and that he visited the sick and those in prison. He wanted people to say that he walked with the Lord.

When that day comes, and you are before the Lord, what will you say? Will you say that you have earned millions? Will you say that you drove a nice car? Will you say that you were respected and feared by many? Will you show the church building that you helped build, the pews you lined, and the cross that you gilded with gold? Will you show the liturgy you practiced, the traditions you upheld? Or will you say, Lord, I walked with you, I followed you, and everything I received I returned to you. I did justice, loved kindness and walked humbly with you, my God. Will you say that you worked to see justice and righteousness flow like stream? Will you say that you gave up all that you had, all that you claimed and walked all the way to the cross and onto the cross for the glory of the Lord?

What are you clutching to? If you are clutching tightly, clutch to the cross, the glory of the cross and know that you will find life and be redeemed.

AMEN