

Several Japanese visited Cameron last week as part of a sister program between the State of Nagano and the State of Missouri. Tammy and Scott Mallen were kind enough to invite me to their home for dinner with the group. I still find the differences in culture between city life and country life interesting. So when the conversation turned to differences between Japanese life and American life it got everyone's attention. Hiroki, the leader of the group from Nagano asked us this question: What is more important to you: your family or your job? This is the kind of question the closest of friends don't often ask each other, but somehow between foreigners, it was fair to bring up. We said that in the US, we place family ahead of job. At least, we say we do, but we do not always act that way. It's complicated because work is a way that we support our family. So if you treasure your family, you treasure your job. We thought that Americans wished they spent more time with their family, but the lure of more money keeps us at work more than it should. Was it different in Japan? Actually, our visitor said it was the same with them.

I think we Americans are greedy. People want to have money, because the more we have the more successful we will seem. Americans define success in terms of finances. This philosophy shows up in many ways. Some people will stay in a job that pays more even if the work is not satisfying, and they'll say they have no choice. Young couples will move in together and postpone a wedding until they can afford the kind of ceremony society says they should have. People cut back their contributions to charity so they can have the home they want, furnished the way they want. The desire for financial success outweighs many other desires in the decisions we make.

We are not the first generation to place its priority on money. In Jesus' day, some people had the same problem. They cared more about their personal wealth, rather than on the needs of others. Jesus tells a parable today about a man who was rich in money but poor in insight. The fellow who prompts this parable wants Jesus the rabbi to shift roles and settle a question about his inheritance. The request is way out of line. The man ignores what Jesus is teaching to express a worry about his own wealth. In addition, he treats Jesus as a civic judge, not a religious leader.

In the parable, a man pulls in a huge harvest, tears down his small barns, builds larger ones, and plans on a long, easy retirement – based on one year's harvest. I guess they had no raccoons attacking corn crops in those days. Jesus calls the man a fool. He is thinking of the wealth in his pocket, not the wealth in his heart. He has gained a fiscal treasure but he has lost a spiritual one.

So how would you answer the question posed by a Japanese visitor? What's more important to you, your family or your job? Your church or your wardrobe? The indigent in Central America or your car payment? How we spend our time and how we spend our money will not tell the whole story, but it will give us a snapshot of our priorities. Sometimes it's a picture we'd rather not see because what we say is important is not always what we do.