

## **“Breaking the Mold”**

***Psalm 37:1-20; Luke 12:22-34***

November 12, 2023

It was March 6<sup>th</sup> of the year 1982, a long time ago but a date that’s engraved in my mind like a timeless inscription on the stone of history. It’s rare that you can look at a date from that many years ago and decisively tell people exactly where you were and what you were doing. Maybe for something like a marriage, that’s easy. But for other events? It’s hard. But I can do it. At least for March 6<sup>th</sup> of 1982. I know exactly where I was, exactly what I was doing. You see, March 6<sup>th</sup> of 1982 was a very important date for many young video-gamers of the era. You see, it was on March 6<sup>th</sup> of 1982 that Atari was set to release a version of their arcade smash Pac-Man for the Atari 2600. Now look with Xboxes and Playstations, it’s hard for many of us to remember a time when the Atari reigned supreme in American households. But I was there and like everyone had an Atari back then. And you’re talking about Pac-Man. Few videogames have made the kind of splash that Pac-Man did when it hit arcades back in the summer of 1980. Kids were lined up at local arcades to play the game. The prospect of getting to play that awesome game at home was sure to be a ginormous draw. And it was. Somehow, I’d convinced my father to join me that day. While I wanted to get to the store at 6am to ensure a copy, Dad declared we could head to the store no sooner than 9am as it opened at 10. We got there and my heart shrunk. There was already a score of people queued up in front of the Richway Department store on Tyvola Road in Charlotte. Richway’s became Targets, in case you never heard of the store. Well, I got in line, convinced we wouldn’t get a copy. At about 9:45, a representative of the store came out with numbers and started handing them out. They explained that if you got a numbered ticket, you’d get a game. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t. Those were some tense minutes of waiting while the man with the numbers started handing them out and heading down the line. I had no idea how many he had so all I could do was wait and hope. There he was, moving slowly down the line coming closer and closer to me. I strayed to see just how many slips he held in his hand but I could not. When he got to a person about four ahead of me in line, he handed out his last slip. Needless to say, I was heartbroken. My dad and I returned home, empty handed with my harboring a major resentment towards him for not allowing us to go at 6am in the morning. And, as it was the days before the internet, I had absolutely no idea for several days of something. News didn’t travel quite as fast in the days before the internet. What the news was that could’ve conceivably made me feel slightly better for having missed out? The game was a complete and total dog. When I finally did get my hands on a copy, weeks later, I only played it for a few minutes before quitting. The game was a cash grab, largely unlike the actual videogame, it was glitchy and terrible graphics. But you see, what I remember is wanting that game so badly. Then, not getting it, I remember the misery of feeling like I was left out.

Material possessions often leave us feeling just like that. Like we’ve labored so hard for something that simply does not meet the bill for providing us contentment. And, as we talked about last week, the more we have, the more we tend to want. Called the hedonic treadmill. The concept of the hedonic treadmill, also known as hedonic adaptation, is a metaphorical representation of the human tendency to return to a relatively stable level of happiness despite major positive or negative events or life changes. According to this theory, as a person makes more money or experiences success, their expectations and desires rise in tandem, which results in no permanent gain in happiness. This phenomenon is akin to a person walking on a treadmill, where they keep walking or even running but stay in the same place, suggesting that people consistently chase happiness but do not necessarily gain ground towards long-term satisfaction.

This concept is pivotal in understanding human behavior, particularly in the context of consumerism and personal ambition. It implies that the pursuit of material gains or achievements, while potentially offering temporary spikes in happiness, does not lead to a lasting increase in overall happiness. Over time, individuals become accustomed to their new situation, and the level of satisfaction derived from it diminishes, leading them to seek out the next thing they believe will make them happy. The hedonic treadmill suggests a paradox of aspiration, where the pursuit of happiness may inadvertently lead to its elusiveness. This insight is crucial in fields like psychology, economics, and philosophy, as

it challenges the assumption that increases in wealth or status are directly proportional to increases in happiness.

But our present fixation on having stuff and gaining more directly contributes to our rising rates of fear and anxiety in this country. In recent years, the United States has witnessed a disquieting rise in anxiety rates among its population. More than a quarter (27.3%) of the adult population aged 18 and over exhibit symptoms of anxiety disorders, a sharp increase from the 8.1% reported in 2019. This distressing trend is further emphasized by the fact that in 2023, 37% of U.S. respondents indicated heightened anxiety compared to the previous year. The period between April 2020 and August 2021 saw rates of anxiety and depression about four times higher than in 2019, with significant increases among males, Asian Americans, young adults, and parents with children at home.

The reasons for this alarming surge are multifaceted. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major catalyst, intensifying concerns around health, safety, finances, politics, and relationships. Additionally, the constant exposure to stressors such as healthcare concerns, mass shootings, climate change, rising suicide rates, immigration issues, sexual harassment/assault news, and the opioid/heroin epidemic has contributed significantly to the nation's anxiety levels. Young adults, in particular, are grappling with the challenges of media multitasking, academic pressures, and economic stress, leading to higher rates of anxiety and depression. This increase in anxiety has had a profound impact on mental and physical health. Chronic illnesses have risen, especially among adults aged 35 to 44, from 48% in 2019 to 58% in 2023, indicating a long-term stress impact since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anxiety, which often coexists with major depression, has led to a situation where only a fraction of those affected (43.2%) receive treatment, despite affecting 6.8 million adults in the U.S. In light of these findings, it becomes evident that the passage from Luke 12:22-34, which exhorts believers not to worry about their lives, resonates deeply in today's context. The pervasiveness of anxiety and its harmful effects on mental and physical health paint a bleak picture, highlighting the urgent need for both spiritual solace and practical solutions. This scenario calls for a compassionate understanding of the struggles faced by many and the importance of addressing both the root causes and the symptoms of this growing concern.

In our sermon today, we delve into the profound insights of Luke 12:22-34, where Jesus addresses the futility of worry and the pursuit of material wealth. This passage speaks directly to our contemporary society, a world increasingly defined by its obsession with materialism. This relentless pursuit, as modern psychology and scientific research reveal, is intricately linked to rising rates of fear and anxiety in our lives. Our culture, saturated with media and advertising, constantly bombards us with the message that success and happiness are synonymous with material possessions. This relentless push towards acquiring more fosters an environment where our self-worth and identity become entangled with what we own. However, this pursuit is a double-edged sword. The very act of chasing material wealth, as numerous psychological studies have found, directly correlates with increased levels of anxiety and stress. This is attributed to the constant pressure to acquire, the fear of losing what we have, and the perpetual state of wanting more. It creates a cycle where satisfaction is always just out of reach, and contentment becomes a fleeting concept.

More insidiously, materialism often leads us down the path of chronic social comparison. In measuring our success against others, we find ourselves in a never-ending competition, one where feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction are common. This comparison, far from being benign, significantly exacerbates our anxiety levels. It distorts our perception of self-worth, tying it intrinsically to the material success that is, by nature, transient and unpredictable. Interestingly, this relentless pursuit of material wealth also creates an illusion of control and security. We often believe that accumulating possessions will shield us from life's uncertainties. However, this is a false sense of security. Psychological research suggests that when we place our sense of control in external, unstable factors like material possessions, our susceptibility to anxiety increases, especially when faced with unpredictability or potential loss.

In stark contrast to this materialistic pursuit, mindfulness and contentment emerge as beacons of hope. Practices centered around mindfulness, which encourage being fully present and accepting of one's current situation, significantly reduce the focus on material desires. Furthermore, contentment,

or a sense of satisfaction with what one has, is inversely related to materialism. Studies have consistently shown that contentment is a key factor in mental well-being, often leading to lower levels of anxiety and a more profound sense of peace. This scientific understanding resonates deeply with Jesus' teachings in Luke. He warned of the futility of worry and the importance of seeking spiritual wealth over material wealth. His words are not mere spiritual aphorisms but are supported by contemporary scientific findings. They offer a path away from the anxiety-ridden pursuit of materialism, guiding us towards a life of trust, peace, and contentment in God's providence. Thus, as we reflect on the words of Jesus in the context of our modern lives, we are called to a deeper understanding and a transformative approach to living. It's an invitation to break free from the shackles of materialism, to redefine our measures of success and worth, and to find our peace and security not in transient possessions but in our enduring faith and trust in God. This is the path to true contentment, a journey away from anxiety and towards a life rooted in spiritual richness and divine trust.

In the Gospel of Luke, the passage of 12:22-34 resonates profoundly with the broader narrative and themes that Luke, the author, meticulously weaves throughout his account of Jesus' life and teachings. This Gospel, distinct in its perspective and emphasis, provides a comprehensive portrait of Jesus as the Savior not just for the Jews but for all humanity. Luke's narrative is carefully structured to highlight key themes such as inclusivity, the role of the Holy Spirit, concern for the marginalized, and the juxtaposition of material wealth against spiritual richness. Luke, traditionally believed to be a companion of the Apostle Paul, writes with a Gentile audience in mind. His narrative style is detailed and orderly, providing a thorough account of Jesus' life from birth to resurrection. The Gospel's structure, moving from Jesus' early life to his ministry, journey to Jerusalem, and finally to his crucifixion and resurrection, is designed to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of God's plan for salvation, accessible to all people.

In Luke 12:22-34, Jesus addresses His disciples, teaching them about trust in God, the futility of worry, and the pursuit of God's kingdom over earthly riches. This section falls within a broader context where Jesus is imparting wisdom on discipleship and kingdom principles. Preceding this passage, Jesus warns against hypocrisy and greed, emphasizing readiness for the kingdom. The teachings following this passage continue to explore themes of watchfulness and faithful service.

In Luke 12:22-34, we see a microcosm of Luke's broader theological and narrative intentions. This passage, rich in its simplicity and depth, serves as a practical application of Luke's central themes. It challenges the reader to reassess their priorities, aligning them with the values of the kingdom of God. Thus, in the larger narrative of Luke's Gospel, this passage stands as a pivotal teaching, encapsulating the essence of Jesus' message and reflecting Luke's intent to present a Savior who is deeply concerned with the spiritual well-being and salvation of all people, irrespective of their social or economic standing. Luke's portrayal of Jesus in this passage invites readers to a transformative understanding of success, security, and satisfaction, steering them towards a life rooted in faith, trust, and the pursuit of things with eternal significance.

In "The Gospel and the American Dream" by Bruce Shelley, a compelling story is presented that contrasts two life paths shaped by different attitudes toward materialism and faith. The first is about a man who, despite external success, ultimately found his life empty and tragically ended it when his materialistic pursuits crumbled. The second story is about a man who left a secure job and financial stability to follow his spiritual calling. He invested his resources into creating a community for students to explore and deepen their faith. Despite financial hardships, he found deep contentment and fulfillment in his ministry and trust in God's provision. These narratives illustrate the profound impact of prioritizing spiritual values over materialistic pursuits, offering insights into finding peace and contentment through faith in Jesus Christ.

The story of the two different approaches to life mirrors what Jesus Christ is telling us here. That our worry is energy ill-suited for the tasks to which God Himself has called us. That following a path of materialistic success is a sure-fire way to find only misery and death while seeking spiritual ends leads to better outcomes.

This story always resonates with me. Let me share with you another date that I know exactly what I was doing. This one's a little more recent, though. It was September 29<sup>th</sup> of 2008. A Monday as it

would turn out. The 28<sup>th</sup> had gone so well. We'd worshipped at First Presbyterian of Mount Holly, seems like I had a fairly decent sermon that Sunday. I know we went out to lunch with my mother on the 28<sup>th</sup>. That's when she made her prediction. Natalie was going to give birth soon. Early the next day, at around 2am, Natalie's water broke and the next thing you know, we were on our way to the hospital. Benjamin was finally on the way. But you know, as the weeks leading up to that day were coming, I began. To get really worried about finances. After all, nothing so much makes you look at the bottom line, so to speak, as when the stork is heading in your direction. So, in the months leading up to Benjamin's birth., I became very focused on our positions in the stock market. And, at the time, Wachovia stock was in play. Long story short, I bought a bunch of it, sure that the bank was going to turn around and regain its standings. But, as we all remember, 2008 was a bit of dicey year, financially. And, as Natalie was giving birth to Ben, the market slumped, losses led by none other than Wachovia stock. I'll never forget coming downstairs once Ben was born to get lunch with my dad. At Caromont Hospital, they've got televisions leading into the cafeteria. There, I saw that Wachovia stock was trading at 17. I thought that was pretty good at first glance. But then, I noticed something. A decimal point. Wachovia stock wasn't trading at \$17 but rather .17 cents. It was a wipeout.

But, given the auspicious events of that day, I knew it was going to be all right, and it was. You see, we can get so worried about our finances about our things that we lose sight of what really matters. God and other people. But, when we return to valuing those things that really matter in the universe, God lets us know through the peace in our hearts that all is well!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.