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In a moving scene in the classic film *Grapes of Wrath* (1940), based on John Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize winner of the same name, Ma Joad sits next to a wood stove, the fire quietly licking out of the circular opening. In her lap is a small wooden box, and she is going through its contents one by one. The room around her is bare; everything the Joads own is packed on a pathetically overloaded truck right outside the door. They are being evicted from the farm in Oklahoma that has been their home for generations—must be off the property by dawn.

She takes from the box an old postcard from New York City, received from someone in her past. She turns the card over, reads the note on the other side, smiles wanly, and drops the card into the fire. Next out of the box is a small ceramic bulldog. Along its spine is the inscription: "Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis 1907." She smiles again and slips the souvenir

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into the pocket of her coat. Another item is a newspaper clipping of an article about the sentencing of her son Tom to seven years in prison for killing a man in a fight. She folds it neatly. (Tom has just returned on parole the day before and will be accompanying the family on the journey to California.)

The men outside have placed the last of their goods on the truck and are ready to leave. "Ma," Tom calls.

"I'm coming," she answers.

The camera pulls back and a tableau materializes: Shadows dance around Ma Joad's form; she is warmed by the glow of the familiar fire yet chilled by the descending despair.

For most of us immersed in our affluent society, Ma Joad's dilemma is probably unfamiliar. Consumerism (read: acquisition run amok) is the very basis of our culture. Our concern isn't over what few pieces of our past we have room for, but more like what more stuff can we add to our already obscene personal inven-

tories. Garages and basements look more like warehouses, and when they are filled, we're renting space in storage facilities for even more stuff.

It's a situation that resonates with the theme of Jesus' parable of the foolish rich man who determined to tear down his storage barns and build ever bigger ones (Luke 12:16-21). There is one significant difference: the contents of the rich man's barns actually had some value; by and large, the contents of our basements and garages (and rented storage areas), are often valueless. It's just that we can't seem to bring ourselves to part with all that stuff.

There is no use pointing fingers: *everyone* is subject to this influence of acquisitiveness. We all have our pet (and sometimes secret) strain of materialism.

My grandmother, an immigrant to the United States during World War I, was one of the most ascetic Christians I've ever known personally. She came from Sweden during a time when fully one-quarter of the population of her mother country had left. Drought, unemployment, and poverty were so bad that in desperation, people were making bread out of sawdust. My grandmother's

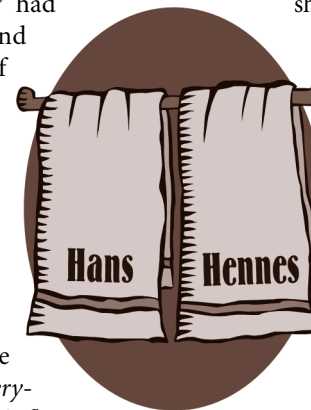
lifetime was utter simplicity.

Yet when she died in 1979, the family found, packed in boxes, enough brand-new bath towels and other bathroom linens to stock a small hotel. And she wasn't just some dotty septuagenarian who had lost her faculties. The acquisition of what would normally be considered evidence of wealth was unimportant to

her, but for some obscure reason she just couldn't pass up a beautiful set of bath towels in the department store—especially if they were on sale.

For some this out-of-control consumerism that has become so characteristic of our times has exploded into all new, exponential proportions. It is clearly apparent that there are those who judge others by what they own.

In a mind-bending essay entitled "The Death of Adam," Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marlynnne Robinson writes, "People spend a great deal of money for the advantages of being perceived to have spent a great deal of money. These advantages are diminished continuously by the change of styles either toward or away from the thing they have bought, which make it either commonplace or *passé*." And this, of course, makes it all the



more important to buy yet more.

It's only fair to observe that not everyone has seemingly been caught up in all this acquisitiveness. Not everyone is a collector of vintage cars or limited edition ceramic figurines or autographed sports memorabilia.

But consumerism has added some creative implements to its toolbox. For many the acquisition of things has been thrown over for the acquisition of experiences that are equally as expensive. There are those who may not own a thing in this world, but they have bungee jumped in the Andes, run with the bulls in Pamplona, kissed the Blarney Stone in Ireland, climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, attended a Super Bowl, mushed a dogsled to the South Pole, had their picture taken in front of the Taj Mahal . . .

Advertisers, as the shrewd students of human nature that they are, have picked up on this. "Many commercials are more concerned to attach a sense of lifestyle and experience to the product being sold than to give details about the product itself."²

The fact is, however, that at some inevitable point we will all face Ma Joad's dilemma: When it's time to

leave this home of our generations, we'll be able to take precious little with us.

"Precious little": *there's* a thought-provoking expression! When it comes down to it, what we hold most precious will most likely be *little*, at least in the material sense.

Jesus Himself said it best: "How do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process? Is anything worth more than your soul?" (Matt. 16:26, NLT). And this from someone who had "'nowhere to lay His head'" (8:20, NKJV).

A few years ago the lyrics of a popular song described a dying card player who offers his listener some advice: "Every gambler knows that the secret to surviving is knowing what to throw away and knowing what to keep."

Jesus is no gambler, but He says basically the same thing—and He's not talking about mere surviving.

REFERENCES

¹ *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 2005), p. 73.

² Glenn Ward, *Postmodernism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Educational, 1977), p. 109.

