



## NIMBY

by

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### Luke 12:13-21

Have you ever seen the movie, *Castaway*, with Tom Hanks? Did you know that the movie was actually misnamed? You see, the original meaning of the word “castaway” is exactly what the word says... “cast away”... or thrown away. Tom Hanks’ character in the movie was not a castaway; he was a plane crash survivor!

Do you know what? You do not become a castaway by accident! Someone has to make you one!

Perhaps the most obvious example of an actual castaway comes from a historical event immortalized in another movie, *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

Captain William Bligh took command of HMS Bounty in 1787. His terrible treatment of the crew resulted in a mutiny in April 1789 and Captain Bligh and 18 loyal crewmembers were set adrift in an open boat... they were cast away from the Bounty.

As you might imagine, castaways usually did not survive very long in the open sea. But Captain Bligh was an exception. Through extraordinary seamanship, he safely navigated more than 3,600 miles to arrive safely at the island of Timor. That is amazing!

The sad truth is that we live in a society that actually casts people away. We live in a society that sets people adrift with inadequate job skills, little or no education, diminished social graces, and in many cases mental handicaps.

And then we have the audacity to tell these people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, get a job, and become a productive member of society!

Let me tell you, in many cases we might as well put a country farmer in an open boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and tell him to find his way to Timor! That is the size of the task we often demand of society’s castaways!

How many castaways are we talking about in America? Would you believe on the order of 37 million? That is the number people living in poverty in our land of incredible abundance... 37 million! And nearly half of these castaways are children!

And the fact is that by and large most of these people do not have the ability to get a job that will pay them a living wage.

Many have made poor life choices... like the teenage unwed mother or the high school dropout. Others suffer from addictions. Still others are mentally ill. And in the end we must realize that life has knocked them down over and over again... and they are not able to get up without help.

In the parable I read from Luke, Jesus condemned the rich man for building bigger barns. The man said, “What shall I do for I have nowhere to store my crops?” But that was not true! The man already had barns, didn’t he?

The rich man’s problem was that God had generously blessed his land with fruitfulness and had thereby enabled the man to become even wealthier. In fact, his harvest had been so great that his existing barns could not hold all of the grain. He was

overflowing with wealth. And so in the final analysis the rich man's problem was that he was too wealthy.

And what was the rich man's reaction to the excess wealth with which he had been blessed? His reaction was to tear down his existing barns and build larger ones.

But Jesus said the man was a "fool". You see, the man was a fool because he did not recognize that just as his wealth had brought him the ability to "eat, drink, and be merry," just as his wealth had brought him a measure of happiness, his excess wealth ought to be used to bring a measure of happiness to others.

The rich man was a fool because he did not realize that the only way his excess wealth could bring a measure of happiness to others was if it were not locked up in those larger barns.

So this parable warns you and me about the shortsightedness of failing to be good stewards of the abundance that God entrusts to us. This parable condemns you and me for our refusal to share our wealth with those in need. That is because you and I cannot escape the fact that as God's people, we are called to share our abundance—our wealth—with those who are without.

As God's people, we who are blessed with more than enough are called to share our plenty with those who do not have enough.

What we are talking about here is meeting the basic human needs of those who do not have enough. We're not talking about things like making sure everyone has a television, for example. But what we are talking about is making sure everyone has the basics of human life... like making sure everyone has enough to eat.

And there are plenty of people in America who don't always get enough to eat.

Did you know that America's Second Harvest food bank network of soup kitchens and food pantries across the U.S. gives food to 23 million people a year? That is more than the entire population of the state of Texas!

And that doesn't include all those people who go to other local feeding agencies across America that are not part of Second Harvest... places like the Salvation Army and local church feeding programs. So the number of Americans who don't always know where their next meal is coming from is really much more than 23 million.

And here is the real tragedy: A recent survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that one in five seeking emergency food assistance in our cities was turned away—Why? Simple... because their cupboards were bare.

My friends, there is only one word for that sad reality... it is a SIN! The reason it is a sin is because we produce more than enough food in America to make sure that no one in this country ever goes hungry! Like the man in the parable, our land has been blessed with incredible fruitfulness. We are wealthy beyond measure when it comes to food production.

Listen to this... according to the USDA, we throw away some 96 billion pounds of food a year from grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, and so on... and a large portion of that amount is perfectly edible.

Think of it... we are so wealthy that we can throw away all that food! Even while millions of our fellow citizens don't always know where their next meal is coming from.

On top of what we throw away is the staggering amount of food wasted at the farm level. Did you know that about 20% of the food commercially grown in the United States doesn't even make it to the marketplace? Twenty percent... that is billions and billions and billions of pounds of food!

And one reason it never makes it to the marketplace is that you and I are picky consumers. We want our fruits and vegetables to be the right shape, the correct size, the perfect color, the right amount of ripeness.

Think of your own buying habits in the grocery store... we thump the melons and select the one that sounds right... We pull back the husks of the corn, and reject several before we get the ones we want... and if someone before us has pulled back the husk, we don't even look at it since it has already been inspected and rejected by someone else.

You wouldn't buy a tomato in the grocery store if it had a little black spot on it; but if you grew that very same tomato in your garden you would be proud of it... you'd just cut the black spot away!

Well, farmers know just how picky we are, and that is why only the very best of their crops even make it to market. The rest, as I said, about 20% of the produce commercially grown in the U.S., is dumped or left to rot in the fields because of slight imperfections or because of market forces.

Now I am not going to suggest to you that you should select the lower quality produce in the grocery store. But the point is that our American barns are so overflowing with food that we can afford to be as picky as we are. And the consequence of our pickiness and other market forces is an incredible amount of food going to waste while millions of our neighbors experience hunger.

If you think about the amount of food that goes to waste in America it becomes clear that there is no reason why anyone goes hungry in the U.S. And as the people of God who are called to meet others in their need, as those who are commanded by Jesus to love our neighbors, how can we tolerate the reality of hunger in our nation of abundance?

Have you ever heard the term, NIMBY? It means, "Not in my back yard"... as in a soup kitchen is fine, as long as you don't put it in my neighborhood—in my backyard. After all, soup kitchens attract all sorts of undesirables.

It troubles me that the NIMBY syndrome is so commonplace in our society. We might be all for a halfway house for recovering drug addicts, for example, but we don't want it in our community. A free clinic is a great idea, but not in my backyard!

NIMBY...I think we need to turn NIMBY on its head!

There was a volunteer in a soup kitchen in Washington, DC. Another volunteer asked her if she was a member of the church that ran the soup kitchen. Now listen carefully to her reply! She said, "No. I just live in the neighborhood. And I don't think that there should be any hungry people in my neighborhood."

What a Christian spin on NIMBY! This person didn't think there should be any hungry people in her backyard! And then she went and did something about it!

The first Tuesday in June is National Hunger Awareness Day. And as we turn our hearts and our minds toward the hungry in our own communities across this great

nation, we need to become like that volunteer. Each of us needs to say the same thing she said. Each of us needs to say that when it comes to hunger, “Not in my backyard.”

So let me challenge you to do three things....

First, please hold the nation’s hungry in prayer. Pray each day for those who struggle in this land of abundance to get enough for their families to eat. Also pray for those who have responded to God’s call to serve the poor.

SECOND, make a financial contribution to a hunger ministry. Food banks, soup kitchens, and other hunger relief ministries need money to operate. Many of them such as the Society of St. Andrew can provide food to the needy for pennies per serving. Also, organizations like Bread For The World who speak out on behalf of the poor rely on donations from people like you.

FINALLY, become a volunteer. Authentic Christian discipleship does not permit a gap between what we say and what we do. If we say we are against hunger in America, we must be willing to put our hands and feet to work in the service of Jesus Christ to that end. As Mother Teresa once said, “If you can’t feed one hundred people, feed just one.”

My friends, we have the ability within the Christian community to eliminate hunger in our country. And I am convinced that God wants us to do just that. You see, we in the Christian community in this country have large enough barns... we’ve gathered up enough wealth. And it is way past time for us to share our excess wealth with those who do need it.

In Matthew 25 Jesus said that when we feed the hungry, we are really feeding him. When we clothe the naked, we are clothing him. When we welcome the stranger, we are welcoming him. When we give drink to the thirsty, we are giving drink to him. When we visit the sick, we are visiting him.

Ask yourself... where are the hungry, the thirsty, and those in need of clothing? Where are the strangers, the sick, and the outcast, the castaway? Where are those who need our help?

My friends, they are right there—in our own backyard.

And it is way past time for us—for you and me—to stand as one and to shout to the world, “Not in my backyard!”

What do you mean that there are hungry people in our community? No way! Not in my backyard!

What do you mean that there are homeless people within a block from the nation’s capitol? Well, that is not going to happen in my backyard!

There are people getting knocked down by life? Not in my backyard! We’re going to find a way to help them stand back up!

Are there castaways in our society? That is not going to happen in my backyard because there is no such thing as a castaway in God’s eyes.

God has blessed each one of us with an incredible abundance. Let us not build more barns. Instead, let us put our wealth and our hands and feet to work to end the injustice of hunger in our backyard.

AMEN.