

Parable of the Rich Fool
Pastor John E. Dubler
Luke 12:13-21

Jesus denounces covetousness and warns about being paralyzed by possessions

The topic of money and wealth are prominent in Luke's Gospel. In this instance, we see Jesus turning the occasion of a question about money into an opportunity to teach about the futility of amassing great wealth if one is not also rich toward God. He also addresses the underlying problem of covetousness when the man asks Jesus to serve as arbiter in his dispute with his brother over the family inheritance.

The Parable of the Rich Fool: Luke 12:13-21



Rembrandt's "Rich Fool" (Detail)

Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." 14 But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." 16 And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. 17 And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' 18 "Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' 21 So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." ¹

The Tenth Commandment: Exodus 20:17

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹ All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Updated Version unless otherwise noted.

The Rabbi consulted on a question of money and ethics



Somebody in the crowd who recognized Jesus as a Rabbi asks Him to render a judgment regarding possessions. It was not uncommon for Rabbis to be consulted about decisions of judgment, and historically Rabbis performed the function of itinerant judge, traveling from place to place to render judgment in civil disputes and other legal matters. [Photo from christslave.org]

Divide the inheritance

We are not given any detail about the case at hand. Indeed, Jesus probably would not have permitted the questioner to share detail even if he had tried. The man wants Jesus to order his brother to share the family inheritance with him. Inquiring minds can only make assumptions at this point. Perhaps the elder brother (who would have been entitled the entire estate including the

birthright and blessing from his father along with the responsibility of caring for the family as the father would have done) was somehow charged by his parents to share some of the estate and was not doing so. In whatever case may be imagined, the outcome of the answer is not predicated on the injustice of the case whether perceived or real.

Jesus identifies the underlying problem

Solving the “presenting” problem or surface issue (what the man complains about) would not have solved the root problem in this case—or in any other case for that matter. It is a wise counselor who will listen to the surface problem with one ear while listening to the Lord with the other to determine the underlying or root problem. The surface problem in this case is a question about the inheritance; the root problem is greed.

Jesus unwilling to preside over a family dispute



“Man, who appointed me a judge or arbiter over you?” Jesus responds. He is unwilling to sort through the details of a family dispute over money precisely because the family quarrel is not the real issue. The condition of man’s heart is at the root here, and Jesus delivers a sharp warning without entering into judgment over the specifics. This is consistent with Jesus’ overall mission to come first with the salvation message of grace

and forgiveness. His second coming will be with judgment and fire. In the inauguration of His public ministry Jesus was at Nazareth in the synagogue. They handed Him the Isaiah scroll and listened while Jesus read, [Image from covlife.org]

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
Because the LORD has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And freedom to prisoners;
To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD
Isaiah 61:1-2 and Luke 4:18-19

There He stopped in mid-sentence. He did not read the very next line: “And the day of vengeance of our God.”²

The Gospels confirm that Jesus’ first coming was to proclaim forgiveness and not judgment:

For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. John 3:17

And again:

If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. John 12:47-48

Real life is not about possessions

The issue at hand is not inheritance but what is the consistency or nature of real life. Jesus tells the offended brother, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” Looking at the second part of His statement first, we find that “life” (Greek ζωή—zoe) is not defined by possessions. Real life does not consist of possessions and things. Earthly life must be lived with a view toward eternity, where possessions are of no consequence whatever.



Covetousness is idolatry, according to Exodus 20. Therefore exalting possessions and things above their rightful and useful place is not real living. In fact, working for possessions and miserly hoarding them is roundly condemned in Scripture as both unwise and idolatrous.

Isaiah 55:2
Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
And your wages for what does not satisfy?

² Isaiah 6:2

Beware and be on guard against every form of greed

The first part of Jesus' warning about material possessions is a caution to "beware and be on your guard against every form of greed."

The phrase "be on guard," or "be on your guard" is not commonly used in the New Testament. Therefore the times the phrase appears captures our attention. We are to be on guard concerning:

- Being handed over to the courts (Mark 13:9)
- Greed (Luke 12:15)
- If your brother sins (Luke 17:3)
- Dissipation, drunkenness and worry (Luke 21:34)
- The errors of unprincipled men (2 Peter 3:17)

Jesus notes in this statement of warning that we may encounter more than one form of greed in saying, "Beware and be on your guard against every form of greed." He seems to imply that greed could take forms we have not expected, going beyond what we have heard in the Tenth Commandment which lists things belonging to our neighbor:

- House
- Wife
- Male Servant
- Female Servant
- Ox
- Donkey
- Or anything that is your neighbor's



The "every form of greed" statement leaves plenty of room for variants on an old theme. Our consumer culture with its powerful advertising machine actually encourages many forms of greed which can make us think that real life means an abundance of things. [*Mammoth Jack Mules in Lancaster, PA.*, by the author]

In the parable which follows Jesus' warning, a person who falls for the possessions trap is described as a "fool." This is not a slap on the wrist, but a term which describes one who has rejected the ways of God and adopted the ways of the world. The fool rejects the wisdom of God and embraces the way of the world, resulting in death.

Focus on possessions can cause anxiety

Context is always revealing, and this case is no exception. By reading past the immediate passage we find that over-attention to possessions (whether abundance or lack) results in anxiety. Turning to His disciples after giving the Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus says, "For

this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.”³

The parable of the Rich Fool illustrates Jesus’ point concerning life and possessions.

Elements of the parable:



The Piedmont near Turin, Italy—very productive land

1. The Land. “The land of a rich man was very productive.” Here we may substitute “job” or “work” if we like for “land.” Whatever we are doing, especially as we follow the Lord, may become very productive indeed. Following God’s ways may bring prosperity. Having money and wealth is a mixed blessing. We are spared deprivation and want, but we have added responsibilities. Therefore in Proverbs 30 we find this instruction:

Keep deception and lies far from me,
Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that is my portion

That I not be full and deny You and say, "Who is the LORD?"
Or that I not be in want and steal,
And profane the name of my God.⁴

It may be worth asking ourselves if we can honestly pray “give me neither poverty nor riches.” Wealth is a great deceiver, and its chief deception is that it promises happiness. We should all know by now that its promise of happiness is entirely vacant.

But concerning our job (or our land), we are further warned in Deuteronomy that when we prosper we must not forget God:

Then it shall come about when the LORD your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you, great and splendid cities which you did not build, and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and hewn cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and you eat and are satisfied, then watch yourself, that you do not forget the LORD who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.⁵

³ Luke 12:22-23

⁴ Proverbs 30:8-9

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:10-12

2. A man who takes his own advice.

Here is an interesting conversation which the rich man has with himself. Let's listen more closely to the elements of the conversation.

a. "And he began reasoning to himself, saying . . ." We always get in trouble when we begin reasoning to ourselves. The conversation this man needed to have was not with himself but with God. Take counsel of the Most High, for He alone does wonders, He alone knows the future, He alone gave you prosperity in the first place, and He alone should be the One to determine how you dispose of what He has given you.



b. "What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?" Prosperity brings the problems of storage and disposal. The man's crop that year was so large that it exceeded storage capacity. This is a familiar problem for wheat and corn growers in the United States. A wise

individual and a wise nation will seek to honor God with the abundance.

However, we may not always have an abundance of grain world-wide. In 2007 the United States planted more acres of corn than at any time since WWII. The 12-13 billion bushel harvest this year will far exceed available storage. Yet, it is projected that in 2008 the world will again consume more grain than it produces for the third year in a row. World grain stockpiles are now at only 56 days supply. We should be praying for wisdom for our grain producers. Without God's intervention, food shortages now look inevitable.

c. "Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'" An observant learner will certainly find wisdom by learning from the rich fool's error. Let us not follow the path of this foolish man. His conclusion about the problem of accumulated wealth was that storage capacity was inadequate. The opposite was true. He had plenty of off-site storage capacity. He could have blessed many others with the wealth God had given him. Instead he chose to hoard. A little quiet time with the Lord of all the earth will quickly reveal to us if we are hoarding wealth—and what we should do instead.



d. "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" Now the foolish man concludes that his stored wealth will provide for all his future needs. This is entirely contrary to the ways of the Lord who alone is our provider. Preparation for the future, and even storing up for retirement is not condemned here, but putting confidence in the storage and assuming that tomorrow will be the same as today, only better, is the problem.

Simple storage as a matter of preparation for an uncertain future is not condemned in Scripture:

Proverbs 13:22

A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children,
And the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.

Proverbs 6:6-8

Go to the ant, O sluggard,
Observe her ways and be wise,
Which, having no chief,
Officer or ruler,
Prepares her food in the summer
And gathers her provision in the harvest.

In neither case cited above is the presumption that stored wealth will provide years of ease and carefree living for the owner.



3. God speaks to the foolish man. [Image: Roman coin hoard]

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’” A final element of the parable is God Himself, bringing His evaluation of the man’s storage plan into sharp focus. God will weigh in on our plans. It is much wiser to have Him evaluate the plan before we implement it, and to follow His ways concerning the plan, than to have it evaluated at our death and we be found wanting.

Proverbs 16:3

Commit your works to the LORD
And your plans will be established.

The man will have to leave all his possessions here. Nobody takes anything with him when he dies. All possessions and wealth remain behind. This truth has long been problematical for men. Pharaohs have had various possessions, even food, buried with them in the pyramid tombs so that the possessions would be available to them in the afterlife. The mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor contained more than 8,000 terracotta soldiers⁶ so he would have an army available to him in the afterlife—certainly a useful concept and rational idea for one who is ignorant of what happens to a man after death.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes emphasizes the problem of accumulated wealth quite clearly:

⁶ The life-size figures of soldiers and warriors were buried about 210 BC. Every soldier is unique with distinctly different facial features and expressions. Only the generals are larger than life at about 6 feet 5 in., more than a foot taller than the soldiers of the day.

Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.⁷

Treasure stored up for yourself

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus instructs us:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.⁸



The same phrase in store up “for yourself,” in the Sermon on the Mount is used here in the Parable of the Rich Fool. If life is a matter of your own possessions, everything for one’s self, then indeed the preacher is right, “this too is vanity.” But it need not be this way. In revealing the error of the rich fool, the Lord also tells us the answer to possessions.

Rich toward God

The parable concludes with this phrase: “So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” Possessing riches in the world does not mean that the owner is also rich toward God. Indeed the probability is the exact opposite. Riches and wealth are great deceivers. They blind the eyes of their owners and imbue in them idolatry and greed. The answer is to be rich in a completely different way—rich toward God. Storing up for ourselves treasures in heaven means living for the Lord instead of oneself.

Being rich toward God: A matter of focus

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus addresses the problem of having one’s focus on material possessions, seeking them instead of seeking first God’s kingdom.

Do not worry then, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear for clothing?” For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Matthew 6:31-33

⁷ Ecclesiastes 2:18-19

⁸ Matthew 6:19-21

Clearly, then the problem is not one of having possessions, but having one's focus on the Lord and not acquiring wealth. Contrary to what the world preaches about wealth, it does not bring happiness. There is no great virtue in poverty either. That is why the Word tells us, "Give me neither poverty nor riches ; Feed me with the food that is my portion."⁹ Focus is everything. If we focus on God's kingdom, then if wealth follows it will be in perspective, useful to the Lord and His desires. If wealth does not follow, then fine. "Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's,"¹⁰ how much more are we His whether we are rich or poor.

Proverbs 23:4-5 provides a very good reason why our focus should not be on wealth:

Do not weary yourself to gain wealth,
Cease from your consideration of it.
When you set your eyes on it, it is gone.
For wealth certainly makes itself wings
Like an eagle that flies toward the heavens.

Solomon had it all. His conclusion? He hated life.



King Solomon
by Barry Moser

Nobody was ever more wealthy than Solomon. No one tried more of life's work or pleasure to bring himself happiness. He stimulated his mind with wine, he built houses and planted vineyards. He planted gardens and parks and all kinds of fruit trees. He constructed elaborate ponds for irrigation and irrigated a forest of trees. He had male slaves. He had female slaves. He had homeborn slaves. He possessed flocks and herds. He collected silver and gold in abundance. He had the treasure of kings like none before him. He acquired lands and provinces. He entertained himself with male singers and female singers. He had 300 concubines and 700 wives. But they turned his heart away from God. "For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been."¹¹

Solomon refused nothing to his eyes, nor any pleasure to his heart. He tried folly and he tried wisdom and after trying to please himself with everything under the sun he made this conclusion:

Ecclesiastes 2:17

So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.

⁹ Proverbs 30:8

¹⁰ Romans 14:8

¹¹ 1 Kings 11:4

And that is the frustrating fate of everyone who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.

Are you rich?
Are you rich toward God?



“The land of a rich man was very productive . . .”
Pennsylvania Farmland by the author