

The Parable of the Rich Fool

Our New Testament reading is Luke 12:13-21. Jesus is abruptly interrupted by a man in the crowd, who calls on Jesus to meet a demand of his. Although in his answer Jesus issues a mild rebuke, he doesn't dismiss the man's request as irrelevant to the subject at hand. Rather, Jesus considers this as a God-given moment for him to say something of importance, not only to the man and the disciples, but also to the crowd. The heart of Jesus' reply to this man who wants Jesus to settle a property dispute with his brother is his Parable of the Rich Fool.

Follow as I read: **Luke 12:13-21**

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴ But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵ And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." ¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷ And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸ Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull 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 ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' ²⁰ But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

It's interesting that Jesus spoke more about material wealth than about any other subject other than the kingdom of God. That's because Jesus understood the seductive power of wealth and its potential to "choke out" the life of his word (Luke 8:14 and parallels). When Jesus warned about the power of wealth to draw hearts away from God, he personified material wealth by using the Aramaic word "Mammon." In this way Jesus graphically spoke of money as a demonic idol that, if not under control of service to God, will draw us from devotion to him alone.

If we're willing to consider the entire range of Jesus' teachings, we can't ignore what Jesus would say to us about the pitfalls and dangers of the material. Just like the first disciples, we're not prepared for living and serving faithfully in the kingdom of God if we haven't come to an understanding of how material wealth impinges on our thinking and relating to the world around us. This parable comes in the context of Jesus' teaching his disciples about how to be Spirit-led witnesses in a hostile environment. How we treat the financial side of life is an important part of our witness in this secular, materialistically minded Western culture.

One Saturday morning in Belgium I was sickened to watch an American tel-evangelist, broadcasting from California, as he worked his audience into a fever pitch, by coaching them to chant the word "rich"! Misusing the example of

Abraham and later the Israelites as they “plundered” the Egyptians, he assured this congregation of probably disenfranchised and naïve followers, that God wants everyone of them to be materially wealthy. This man is a false prophet calling his congregation to worship before the idol Mammon, just as he’s doing by exploiting his audiences for his own financial gain. I was saddened to think that people in Europe who might watch that false prophet will identify all evangelical Christians with his gross distortion of the biblical message.

In his Parable of the Rich Fool, in sharp contradistinction from the wealth and success “gospel,” Jesus issues an urgent warning. In reply to the request of the man for Jesus’ assistance in gaining his share of the inheritance, Jesus said “Take care! Be on your guard....” (15).

The man in the crowd interrupted Jesus’ teaching with his request for assistance in getting his share of his father’s inheritance from his brother. This man was following Old Testament law (Deuteronomy 21:17) that provided the older son with a double share and the younger with a third of the inheritance. And he regarded Jesus as a rabbi who had the authority to issue a ruling that would give him his fair share.

But Jesus knew that this man needed far more than his share of the property. He needed the healing of a heart that was made sick from an obsession with and a greed for material gain. Jesus saw a man alienated from his brother and so told a parable, a story about another man who had become obsessed and separated from others because of his wealth and greed. The man in the crowd was so obsessed over his wealth that he wasn’t even listening to what Jesus was teaching. Jesus had been teaching about the Holy Spirit (12) and suddenly this man asks Jesus to help him get his inheritance settlement resolved.

This man knew his religious and legal rights, and aware that Jesus was a religious teacher, planned to use him to his advantage. The Old Testament laws were given to protect others from exploitation and to provide stability for society. But Jesus came to inaugurate a kingdom that was based on love, grace and grateful giving, rather than protecting “what’s mine.” The New Testament simply assumes that our giving will take us beyond the minimal Old Testament practice of tithing, and that we’ll give as God prospers, in faith, generously and even sacrificially. And Jesus cares about the motive for our giving. Certainly Jesus would condemn the attitude of the man who sued his church to reclaim his past years’ tithe because God had not prospered him financially as his pastor’s sermons had promised.

When our son Kyle was a preschooler, a popular toy was a plastic tricycle called a “Big Wheel,” designed to look like a motorcycle. Darren, a neighbor friend down the street was given a Big Wheel for his birthday, one that exceeded Kyle’s in size and in the number of “bells and whistles.” Although all the kids on the block had a Big Wheels, they wanted the opportunity to ride on Darren’s.

I was outside working in the front yard, when Kyle came running out of our house with the little green New Testament that the Gideons had distributed at his school some weeks before. I asked him, "Kyle, where are you going with your New Testament?" He replied as he ran down the street, "Darren won't share his Big Wheel with me, and I'm going to show him that the Bible says you're supposed to share!"

We can use Scripture and religious authority and even prayer to try to enhance ourselves.

Jesus introduced the parable with his warning about greed, an insatiable desire for things that's never satisfied. In the parable, a man becomes victim of his own good fortune. He's faced with a dilemma—what to do with a bumper crop. He's a wealthy farmer surrounded by poor farmers who live on a subsistence economy. But he takes no thought for others.

In this parable, Jesus was addressing a group of disciples and a crowd of people who by comparison were much poorer than possibly all of us here in this congregation this morning. Greed can infect the heart of anyone. The Apostle Paul wrote a warning to young pastor Timothy regarding those "who *want to be rich*" and (who) "fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (1Tim. 6:9). None of us, regardless of our financial position, is immune from the seductive power of riches.

Jesus is our provider but he's not our financial assistant who's going to help us gratify an insatiable appetite that will separate us from God and others and make us oblivious of our need to share our abundant resources with those in need. We can see this deception about the value of the material vis-à-vis the spiritually eternal in the clichés and collective, conventional "wisdom" of our culture. When someone asks about the estate of a recently deceased wealthy person, often the question is, "What was she worth?" meaning, "What was the amount of her wealth when she died?" Although usually asked with only the desire to know one's material wealth, this phrase betrays the fact that often a person's worth is based on one's material assets. This is cultural deception. The man in Jesus' parable was deceived about reality.

From the world's point of view, the rich man was anything but a fool. He was a successful farmer and a shrewd agribusiness man. Surrounded by poor subsistence farmers, this man was a success by anyone's standards. Were he alive today, he'd likely be invited to appear on one of the many network financial talk shows to share the secret of his success. He was a ruthless businessman. His decision to hoard his excess crops was a way to drive up food prices for everyone else. Not only was he shrewd, but his practices were heartless, inconsiderate and "monstrous" (J Green).

The two people in our text, the one in real life and the one in the story, were both living for the “here and now,” and oblivious to the eternal. Materialism by definition says that “physical matter is the only fundamental reality,” that there’s no spiritual dimension, no kingdom of God. They were an embodiment of a culture caught up in the pursuit of material gain. Our culture is captive to the forces of selfish materialism. But also, we as individuals are responsible with the wealth that’s been entrusted to us.

Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, a right worldly bunch of Christians, said that as followers of Christ we’re given wealth and material means for two reasons—to not be a burden to others and to be able to give to others (See 2 Thess. 2:6-10; 2 Cor. 9:11, Eph. 4:28). Obviously, the men in our text had forgotten their responsibility with wealth. The man who called on Jesus to be the judge of his brother forgot that he had a responsibility to relate to his brother; and the man in the story thought only of himself. Note how many times he says “I, my, myself,” with no regard for others, and certainly with no thought for God.

Commenting on the man’s decision to store his crops in new and bigger barns so he could take life easy for himself, Augustine said “He did not realize that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns.” He had no thought at all for God’s kingdom. The Prophet Malachi said we are to bring all of God’s tithes into his “storehouse” (Mal. 3:10). Certainly in our use of wealth we’re responsible to support the work of the kingdom of God.. The rich man, instead of seeking to give to God and his kingdom causes, decided to build bigger barns and storehouses for himself.

All the things that we now possess are on loan from God, which is something the rich fool seemed to forget. He was making his retirement plans with no thought beyond his own security, enjoyment and self-indulgence. This man was a fool also because he failed to see that his own soul was on loan from God and would return to him for judgment.

Remember seeing the bumper sticker which read: “The one who dies with the most toys wins”? “Wins what?” is my question. What a blind and foolish philosophy of life that comes straight from hell and the Destroyer, Satan himself! One of the devil’s names, Apollyon, means Destroyer (Rev. 9:11). The rich man was a fool for failing to see in his hoarded wealth the seeds of self-destruction and everlasting want.

Someone asked the accountant of a wealthy business tycoon how much wealth he left behind upon his death and the accountant replied, “He left it all.”

And this was true for the rich fool. He left it all. All material things, things we can see, said Paul, are temporary. Only kingdom of God reality, that which we cannot now see, is eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). Jesus calls us to invest in God’s

riches, to add to his wealth. He entrusts us with the material so that our lives can enrich his kingdom and glory. Instead of enhancing our wealth, which is limited and temporal, we have the opportunity to add to God's kingdom through the way we use and share the resources he's entrusted to us (Lk. 16:9). Pensions and long-term investments, as you know, are never entirely safe. The safest long-term investments we can make are what we give to the work of God's kingdom.

And we become rich towards God eternally as we lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:19). God measures our gifts, not in dollar amounts, but in the spirit of giving with joy and gratitude. This isn't the "heavenly materialism" of wanting a bigger reward, maybe a bigger mansion than our neighbors.

Well-known writer and psychology professor Richard Beck tells a story from his experience in a worship service, seated next to Jeffrey, a young man with cognitive disabilities, whom Richard had brought to church. When the offering plates were passed, Jeffrey wanted to give but had no money. Richard gently assured him he didn't need to give. But that didn't help. Richard even offered to give Jeffrey money to put in the plate, but he refused. Jeffrey desperately wanted to give something of his own. When the ushers passed their pew, Richard noticed that Jeffrey was suddenly calm. He had obviously decided on something. Richard reports:

"As the baskets passed behind us he turned in his seat and solemnly took off his baseball hat.

And then he placed his hat in the collection basket...Jeffrey turned to me beaming," says Richard. "I gave my hat," said Jeffrey with a huge smile. Richard beamed back, with tears in his eyes. "I saw, Jeffrey, I saw," said Richard, and Jeffrey leaned over for a hug.

"We rejoiced in his gift,' said Richard. "Jeffrey's generosity interrupted me in ways that I will carry forever. I was changed that night," said Richard (76-78, *Reviving Old Scratch: Demons and the Devil for Doubters and the Disenchanted*).

O, that you and I could have Jeffrey's spirit of giving. The demon of materialism would be slain. We'd all be "rich toward God." And what seems foolish to the world would change us and delight the heart of God.