

Luke 12:13-21
November 3, 2019

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: Do you think it's wrong to seek to improve your financial condition? What about wanting to get rich? [Let people engage]

Transition:

The world says that life consists of things, but God says that life consists of being rightly related to Him and to others. The world would view this rich man as a success. He would be featured in business magazines as a model to follow. He had not gained his wealth by dishonest or corrupt means. He had worked for it, poured his money back into the business, and had done well. He was financially secure. He could now enjoy the good life: good food, fine wine, servants, and whatever pleasures money could afford. Isn't that what we all aim for in life? Isn't that why we go to college, so that we can have a good career, make plenty of money, provide the finer things in life for our children, and retire some day with plenty in our investments?

Jesus tells a parable regarding a rich man in response to someone who asked Jesus to "tell his brother to divide the inheritance." Let's find out what Jesus expects from those who become rich or who desire to be rich. Let's begin.

BOOK:

The Parable of the Rich Fool

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

¹⁴ Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" ¹⁵ Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."

²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

²¹ "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

Tension Questions:

How much is enough? At what point do we violate Jesus' point about not laying up treasure for ourselves?

How can we be on guard against all greed? Is all luxury wrong? How do we define luxury in light of the world's poor?

Are things like insurance and investments opposed to trusting in God and seeking first His kingdom?

Summary:

The sin is not in having more, the sin is being discontent. The sin is not in having wealth, the sin is in what you do with it. It's not the amount, it's the attitude. Abraham was wealthy. Job was wealthy. Solomon was wealthy. Even in the New Testament, no doubt Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy. And there were wealthy people in the New Testament who had the church in their home because they had a large enough home to have a church. It's not about what you have, it's about how you feel about what you have. And that's what the Scripture warns about. It warns about greed and covetousness and the lust for more, so as to consume it on your own desires.

LOOK:

To be *really* rich, Jesus says that we must be rich toward God by laying up treasure in heaven. Paul says that we do that when we are rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. We should think of ourselves standing before God, giving an account of what He has entrusted to us. Will we be *really* rich on that day?

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 220-221). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Beware of Covetousness (Luke 12:13–21)

At this point, a man in the crowd interrupted Jesus and asked Him to solve a family problem. Rabbis were expected to help settle legal matters, but Jesus refused to get involved. Why? Because He knew that no answer He gave would solve the *real* problem, which was covetousness in the hearts of the two brothers. (The “you” in Luke 12:14 is plural.) As long as both men were greedy, *no* settlement would be satisfactory. Their greatest need was to have their hearts changed. Like too many people today, they wanted Jesus to serve them but not to save them.

Covetousness is an unquenchable thirst for getting more and more of something we think we need in order to be truly satisfied. It may be a thirst for money or the things that money can buy, or even a thirst for position and power. Jesus made it clear that true life does not depend on an abundance of possessions. He did not deny that we have certain basic needs (Matt. 6:32; 1 Tim. 6:17). He only affirmed that we will not make life richer by acquiring *more* of these things.

Mark Twain once defined “civilization” as “a limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities,” and he was right. In fact, many Christians are infected with covetousness and do not know it. They think that Paul’s admonition in 1 Timothy 6 applies only to the “rich and famous.” Measured by the living standards of the rest of the world, most believers in America are indeed wealthy people.

Jesus told this parable to reveal the dangers that lurk in a covetous heart. As you read it, test your own responses to this farmer’s various experiences.

How do you respond to the wealthy farmer’s *dilemma*? Here was a man who had a problem with too much wealth! If we say, “I certainly wish I had that problem!” we may be revealing covetousness in our hearts. If suddenly you inherited a great deal of wealth, would it create a problem for you? Or would you simply praise God and ask Him what He wanted you to do with it?

There are perils to prosperity (Prov. 30:7–9). Wealth can choke the Word of God (Matt. 13:22), create snares and temptations (1 Tim. 6:6–10, 17–19), and give you a false sense of security. People say that money does not satisfy, but it does satisfy *if you want to live on that level*. People who are satisfied only with the things that money can buy are in great danger of losing the things that money cannot buy.

This farmer saw his wealth as an opportunity to please himself. He had no thoughts of others or of God.

How do you respond to the *decisions* of the rich man? Are you saying, “Now that is shrewd business! Save and have it ready for the future!” But Jesus saw selfishness in all that this man did (note the eleven personal pronouns), and He said the man was a fool. The world’s philosophy is “Take care of Number One!” But Jesus does not endorse that philosophy.

There is certainly nothing wrong with following good business principles, or even with saving for the future (1 Tim. 5:8). Jesus does not encourage waste (John 6:12). But neither does He encourage selfishness motivated by covetousness.

How do you respond to the farmer’s *desires*? Are you saying, “This is the life! The man has success, satisfaction, and security! What more could he want?” But Jesus did not see this farmer enjoying life; He saw him facing death! Wealth cannot keep us alive when our time comes to die,

nor can it buy back the opportunities we missed while we were thinking of ourselves and ignoring God and others.

Jesus made it clear that true life does not come from an abundance of things, nor do true success or security. This man had a false view of both life and death. He thought that life came from accumulating things, and that death was far away. On March 11, 1856, Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal, "That man is the richest whose pleasures are cheapest." He also said, "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone."

Finally, how do you respond to the *death* of the boastful farmer? We are prone to say, "Too bad this fellow died just when he had everything going for him! How tragic that he could not finish his great plans." But the greatest tragedy is not what the man left behind but what lay *before* him: eternity without God! The man lived without God and died without God, and his wealth was but an incident in his life. God is not impressed with our money.

What does it mean to be "rich toward God"? It means to acknowledge gratefully that everything we have comes from God, and then make an effort to use what He gives us for the good of others and the glory of God. Wealth can be *enjoyed* and *employed* at the same time if our purpose is to honor God (1 Tim. 6:10ff). To be rich toward God means spiritual enrichment, not just personal enjoyment. How tragic when people are rich in this world but poor in the next! (see Matt. 6:19–34)

Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 238)

b. Jesus' teaching about greed (12:13–21).

12:13–21. This passage explains Jesus' teaching to **guard against all kinds of greed**. Someone wanted Jesus to instruct his **brother to divide up the inheritance** which was due him in an equitable way. Jesus' point was that **life does not consist in** having many **possessions**. The disciples needed to learn the lesson that life is more important than material things. To explain this teaching Jesus told a parable about a **rich man** who continued to build **bigger** and bigger **barns** to **store all his grain and ... goods**. His attitude was that he would have an easy life because he had everything he could possibly want or need. God's response in the parable was that the man was foolish (**You fool!**) because when he died that **night** his goods would do nothing for him. They would simply pass on to someone else. Such a person is **not rich toward God** (cf. 1 Tim. 6:6–10; James 1:10). Luke returned to this subject in chapter 16.

Stein, R. H. (1992). Luke (Vol. 24, pp. 350-353). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Context

Luke next introduced an account unique to his Gospel (cf. however GT 63,72). A question from the crowd (Luke 12:13) ties this passage to the preceding one and leads to Jesus' teaching regarding possessions, and in particular on inheritance rights. Jesus rejected the role of arbiter between brothers. He did not come to reconcile such family disputes. On the contrary, his coming would at times divide families (12:51–53). What this individual needed was not some casuistic legal ruling by a religious teacher but a basic understanding of how possessions relate to the purpose of life. Who one is far more important than what one possesses. The latter is

outside a person; the former is within (11:37–54). Jesus also opposed the request because it arose from greed (11:39). Greed is to be rejected, for the meaning and purpose of life is not found in the accumulation of wealth and possessions (12:15; cf. 1 Tim 6:6–10).

Jesus illustrated the principle, stated as a proverb, with an example parable. In the parable a rich and greedy man, failing to guard himself against covetousness, thinks that success is measured in terms of the abundance of possessions. Although he already possesses more than enough, he can think only of himself (note the frequent “I” in Luke 12:17–19) and his accumulation of more possessions for his personal enjoyment (12:19). But they are not permanent possessions, as he tragically discovers, for what is “invested” with God is permanent, not economic circumstances. When God takes his life, his temporary possessions are all left behind. Instead of being rich toward God, who never entered his thoughts, he lost all he ever worked for and far more besides (cf. 9:25). The parable concludes with an admonition addressed to the brother (12:21) but which Luke hoped Theophilus and his other readers would apply to themselves.

Comments

12:13 Someone in the crowd. Compare 12:1.

Teacher. See comments on 7:40.

Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. The OT regulations regarding the inheritance of property are found in Deut 21:15–17; Num 27:1–11; 36:7–9. Luke did not state what the specific problem was, but this is ultimately irrelevant. What is clear is that the motive behind the question was greed (Luke 11:39), not the fulfillment of Ps 133:1.

12:14 Who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you? This may imply that Jesus did not have the legal standing to make such a decision, but it more likely means that he had not come to deal with such temporary trivia but to offer the world eternal salvation. In light of the arrival of God’s kingdom, issues such as inheritance rights are of little consequence. Better to suffer loss and follow Jesus (cf. Luke 9:57–62).

12:15 Be on your guard. The Greek verb here is different from the one used in 12:1.

All kinds of greed. Greed is an insatiable desire and lust for more and more. It is all-consuming, so that all of life becomes focused on the accumulation of wealth. There is no room for anything else, not even God. This is why it is so hard for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom (18:25).

Life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. Compare 4:4; 9:24–25; 12:22–34.

12:16 An example parable follows. Like the parable of the good Samaritan (10:30–36), “Go and do likewise” (10:37) can be added, although since this one is a negative example we should add, “Do not go and do likewise.”

The ground of a certain rich man. Literally *the land of a certain rich man*. Compare 10:30; 16:19–31, “Context.” The man already was rich at the beginning of the story.

12:17 He thought to himself. Compare 12:45; 15:17–19; 16:3–4; 18:4–5; 20:13.

What shall I do? Compare 16:3; 20:13. The thought itself was in order. His answer, however, was not. The verb (*poiēsō*) can be translated either as future tense (“shall”) or as an aorist subjective (“should”—a deliberative subjunctive). There is no significant difference in meaning.

12:18 I will tear down ... and build bigger ones. A first-century way of “building his investment portfolio.”

Store all my grain and my goods. “Goods” may indicate that he possessed more than just farm produce.

12:19 At this point the man’s greedy character is clearly seen. If he had been aware of 10:25–37, he would have said, “And I shall be even more able to serve God and those less fortunate than I!”

Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry. This capsulizes the hedonistic life-style he planned to follow.

12:20 Now for the first time God abruptly intruded into the man’s thinking, but it was too late.

You fool! Compare 11:40.

This very night. This is in the emphatic position; no time was available to amend his ways.

Your life will be demanded from you. Here the third person plural (literally *They are demanding your soul*) serves as a substitute for the divine passive (see comments on 16:9) and means *God is demanding your soul*.

Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? One should not introduce at this point a concern for children and family, for this is not a real story but a parable. In light of 12:19 the possessions were to be thought of as totally lost (cf. Ps 39:6). Thus, like the millionaire’s accountant when asked how much his employer left when he died, the reply is a succinct, “All!”

12:21 This is how it will be. Jesus applied the parable.

Who stores up things for himself. The fool hoards instead of being concerned for neighbors and for God (Luke 12:33).

Not rich toward God. This is a synonym for “treasure in heaven” (12:33; 18:22). Salvation is by grace alone, and human merit has no standing before God (17:7–10; 18:9–14); however, God grants rewards to those who serve him.

The Lukan Message

Ellis sums up well Luke’s main point and entitles 12:13–34 “To Have or to Live?” Two important themes in this section have come up already and will come up again. These are the issues of priorities (9:23–25; 17:33) and attitude toward wealth (5:11, 28; 12:33–34; 18:22). Here they are intimately associated. In the face of the arrival of God’s kingdom, to be concerned about inheritance rights and goods is folly indeed. Better to focus on the kingdom and allow oneself to be wronged (1 Cor 6:7) than to allow greed (Luke 11:39) to control one’s life. One cannot serve God and Money (16:13). Luke’s remedy in such circumstances was simple. Give to those in need (11:41; 16:9–12; 19:8). One can avoid becoming a slave to possessions by recognizing their temporary quality. The rich fool did not realize that he “owned” nothing. All he had—even his life—was on loan and could be called in at any time. Luke was telling Theophilus: “Friend, order your life in accordance with the one thing that is eternal—God. Let not greed for that which is temporary keep you from eternal treasure!”

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Lk 12:13-21). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.