

The Rich Fool

Luke 12:13-21

With Study Questions

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Then one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." ¹⁴ But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵ And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." ¹⁶ Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. ¹⁷ And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' ¹⁸ So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, *and* be merry.'" ²⁰ But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' ²¹ "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:13-21).

Introduction

I can't remember where, but I do recall seeing a sign recommended for our institutions of government education which read "In case of nuclear invasion the school's ban on praying will be temporarily suspended."

Discussions about God and the things of God are often reduced to mere academic rhetoric. Theology (the study of God) is like a menu in a fancy restaurant where the well-dressed, comfortable and only moderately hungry peruse the items to determine which will best suit their highly selective palate.

It is nothing like what my parents experienced during the Depression when they were forced to eat from a trash can—any item that appeared remotely edible. Earthquakes, floods and tragedies (personal or national things like 9/11) transform cocktail party discussions about divinity into a deep heartfelt quest.

The context of this parable is the imminent judgment of Israel because of their turning away from the true God (Luke 11:29) and subsequent abuse of faith and of each other. Jesus was addressing the attending concern people would have regarding their own ability to

survive. This could have involved the threat of being imprisoned (Luke 12:11) killed (Luke 12:5) or dying due to lack of food (Luke 12:22).

Times were unstable for the Israelites who were essentially a nation under the thumb of another nation. Their very existence was tenuous with the Roman armies ever about. This insecurity would have made the request that launches this parable understandable. Difficulties within families regarding an inheritance are nothing new. Things can get ugly fast.

Then one from the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”¹⁴ But He said to him, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you” (Luke 12:13, 14)?

Appeal to Authority

Jesus was gathering quite a crowd **“an innumerable multitude of people...so that they trampled one another” (Luke 12:1)**. It is natural for people to make the logically fallacious assumption that if someone is popular they must know what they’re talking about. I recently met with my old college room-mates. We shared a brilliant professor. We recalled how a certain student, realizing how brilliant this professor was in kinesiology and physiology simply assumed he knew everything about anything so he would ask him the most random questions.

Many people who organize religious events make the same error. They tend to invite CEO’s and football coaches to be the keynote speakers assuming that if they’re successful in business or coaching they must be qualified.

Of course one could hardly think of anybody more qualified than Jesus to respond to this request. Jesus, no doubt, would have had a keen sense of justice (*kriton*) and unmatched ability to arbitrate (*meristen*—to divide or distribute fairly). But Jesus, as a man, simply did not have that post. He wasn’t going to hand out tickets for double-parked chariots.

Passages like this mistakenly lead people to the assumption that Jesus has no concern for civil matters; as if the Christian should concern himself with personal piety and have no interaction with matters of law and civics. Of course that reasoning does not follow. The President of the United States may not hand out citations for overhead casting on the Redondo Pier but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t believe that should be the law and that it should be enforced.

Sensing the driving force behind the request, Jesus addresses the man's disposition.

And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15).

Who Am I?

The verbs used by Jesus here "**take heed**" *horate* and "**beware**" *phylassesthe* impress upon the listeners the idea of a keen perception of or paying attention to your environment (especially as it relates to your own heart) along with the idea of being on guard or watchful.

Particularly in the issue of an inheritance, where people are often shocked at what they've allowed themselves to become, ungodliness creeps up on us and takes residence. The particular form of ungodliness of which Jesus speaks is covetousness *pleonexias*—desiring more than one's due, greediness, and avarice.

We're then counseled to take inventory of the consistency of our lives—essentially who we are. "Am I" the question might be asked "defined by what I own or possess?" This can be an insidious trap!

Young people, who generally own very little, think they will never fall into this trap. But as time passes you have greater financial responsibilities (insurance, mortgage, food, and clothing). You have others depending upon you—spouses, children, employees, etc. The breadwinner works hard, as called to by the Scriptures:

**Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. ⁷
Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, ⁸ she prepares her
bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. ⁹ How long
will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your
sleep? ¹⁰ A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the
hands to rest, ¹¹ and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed man (Proverbs 6:6-11).**

**But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and
especially for members of his household, he has denied the
faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).**

Be Anxious For Nothing

All the sudden you wake up one day to recognize the youthful freedom from anxiety has been replaced by, what might be considered, an unhealthy obsession with material goods. For some it may be pure avarice from the onset, but for others it may have been a slippery slope.

The parable Jesus will tell should not be understood as a license for lethargy. He is not calling us to aspire to be beggars and bums. Jesus is not, in this parable, addressing lazy people or the issue of the human work ethic. He is addressing anxious people, worried people; people who will not die of hunger but of stress. As He taught elsewhere:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on...²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?³⁴ “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble (Matthew 6:25, 27, 34).

Paul also gives the glorious command:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;⁷ and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6, 7).

In this context, it is not merely people who are sick with worry but people who because of their anxiety will fall temptation to throw their own brother under the bus—or in front of it.

To aid us in avoiding needless anxiety or unseemly behavior Jesus gives us perspective via a parable:

Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully.¹⁷ And he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?’¹⁸ So he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods.¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have

many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, *and* be merry.” ’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided’ (Luke 12:16-20)?’

The Rich Fool

The primary character in this parable is a “**certain rich man.**” Though riches certainly provide a temptation toward ungodliness (Matthew 19:24; 1 Timothy 6:19), it certainly can’t be argued that riches or rich people are inherently sinful (Matthew 27:57).

The rich man in this parable appears to be making a wise decision. The man’s ground yielded plentiful crops and he had to do something about it. It would have been unwise and wasteful for him to allow his crops to be ruined or stolen so he must build greater or larger barns. The problem with this man becomes evident in verse 29 when he begins talking to his own soul.

And it is important to isolate just what makes this man a fool. Laying up goods in preparation for the future is not sinful. It was that very conduct which yielded praise for Joseph in anticipation of famine. Eating, drinking and being merry or cheerful should not be understood as transgressions either. Eating is a necessity, drinking is something Jesus Himself did and we’re commanded to be joyful throughout Scripture.

No, the problem with this man—that which makes this man a fool—is his lack of insight, his unwillingness to consider the inevitability of his future along (which is death) with the absurd notion that his earthly treasures are sufficient to provide genuine rest for his soul.

Jesus accentuates this with a reference to his immediate demise “**This night your soul will be required of you**” for none of us can accurately calculate when the boney finger of death will touch us. Jesus is seeking to instill depth and wisdom in the hearts of his listeners, spurring them to ponder things eternal. The instruction is concluded with what amounts to be a definition of a fool.

So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21).

Rich Toward God

There was a bumper-sticker that became very popular years ago which read “He Who Dies With The Most Toys Wins.” I always thought a responding bumper-sticker might be appropriate, “He Who Dies With The Most Toys Is Dead.” Will the man in this parable, will you, will I, be richer or poorer at death?

And what does it mean to be “**rich toward God**” or “**rich in *eis* God**” or “**with respect to God?**” And how is that obtained? What must take place that person, when our soul is required of us, will come into a full understanding that they have been “blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places?”

There is no value in turning away from riches (or anything else for that matter) to somehow elevate the human soul. It is not merely a turning from but a turning to. And to be rich toward God or rich in God is found only by the grace of God for those who are in Christ Himself.

Would the man who asked this question come to realize that the only hope for his soul would be found in the man who stood before him? All the acts, all the instruction, all the prayers of Christ, like a magnet are designed to draw men to Himself that our hope and faith would not be in the efforts or “**wisdom of men but the power of God**” (1 Corinthians 2:5).

Questions for Study

1. What type of disposition should attend our discussions of God (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is the historical context of this parable (pages 2, 3)?
3. Why would Jesus not judge this man’s request regarding his inheritance? Does this mean Christians shouldn’t be concerned with legal or civil issues (pages 3, 4)?
4. Are material possessions inherently evil? How do we find ourselves overly concerned with our material possessions? How should we or should we not define ourselves (page 4)?
5. Does this parable endorse laziness? Explain (page 5).

6. What does the Bible teach about anxiety (pages 5, 6)?
7. What made the rich man a fool (6, 7)?
8. How is one “rich toward God” (page 7)?