

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

Luke 12:13-21

Life does not consist of material possessions. The Lord Jesus points out very clearly this simple truth in the parable of the rich fool. Let's read this passage. Luke 12:13-21.

Luke 12:13. 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."

The danger of greed

This parable was provoked by a man in the crowd who abruptly interrupts Jesus' teaching in order to get His assistance on a personal matter. The Lord has been talking about the need for faithfulness in situations of persecution (Luke 12:1-12) and here is this man who suddenly appeals to Jesus to settle a dispute over a family inheritance. Jewish laws of succession cover most cases (Deuteronomy 21:15-17; Numbers 27:1-11; 36:7-9) but sometimes an issue would arise that needed intervention. It was quite common at the time to go to a rabbi for a legal ruling. In this case, the man who is speaking feels that an injustice was being done and he is asking Jesus to intervene.

It is not important to know the rights and wrongs of the claim. In fact, they are out of sight in this account. We should note however that the man is not really asking Jesus to arbitrate. Rather he wants Jesus to side with him in this dispute with his brother. Jesus will not honor such a partisan request. He bluntly refuses to get involved. *Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you (v.14)?* In other words, 'Don't ask Me to be an arbitrator between you. I'm not going to play that role.'

The Lord Jesus then uses this man's request as an opportunity to give a warning about excessive focus on possessions. *Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed (v. 15).*

Greed is the desire to have more, to acquire without reference to one's own specific needs or the situation of others. That was the root of the man's problem. By that warning, Jesus uncovers the source of the error which caused the man to ask Him to be an arbitrator. These words of caution are not just for the man; they are given to all. Those of us who live in a society of affluence must be particularly careful. In this respect, it is very easy to become materialistic when so much is spent on advertisement to make us believe that if we buy this and that, we will be happier, more fulfilled, and more comfortable.

The danger of greed is that it can make one self-centered and insensitive to people. Greed can create a distortion about what life is, because the definition of life is not found in objects, but in relationships, especially to God and to His will. *A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions* (v. 15). To define life in terms of things is the ultimate reversal of the creature serving the creation and ignoring the Creator. As Paul says in Romans 1:25, it is 'to worship and serve created things rather than the Creator.'

Sensible actions

Jesus illustrates His point that life consists of more than wealth and possessions with a parable. The story centers around one character, a landowner for whom everything in his business goes right. The harvest for that year was exceptional, leaving this man, already rich, in a very enviable situation. So huge was his crop that his barns were not big enough to store everything. Quite naturally he wants to preserve his crop. So he reflects on his situation and makes this decision. Rather than building additional barns which would take up land that might otherwise be used for agricultural production in subsequent years, he chooses to tear them down in order to make room for larger ones. It is clear that he does not plan to contribute to the current year's saturation of the market with his surplus. He wants to hold back his harvest so that he can sell it later at a better price.

Is there anything wrong with this wealthy farmer? The parable portrays this man as a person who makes prudent and efficient plans. With clear-sightedness and practical wisdom, he upgrades his storage capability so that he would be able to care not only for all his grain but for other goods as well. *I will store all my crops and my goods* (v. 18). Don't you think that what he did was the most sensible thing to do? Wouldn't you have done the same thing if you were in his position? You see, part of the power of this parable is that much in the man's response seems so natural.

In fact, he might even be regarded as specially blessed by God. That is what the Jews thought, that every rich man is blessed by God because after all, the weather plays a great part in how successful a farmer can be. You may be very skillful in your farming, but if the weather is bad, your crops will be bad too. Perhaps no business other than farming is so dependant on weather, and therefore, on the mercies of God. So would it not seem that God was blessing this man with an abundance of harvest?

From the moral point of view, we can't say anything against him either. There is no hint of cheating or immorality. Nowhere is it mentioned that he has done something dishonest. The picture seems to be an ideal one. What is the problem then?

The story is intriguing in that this man's additional wealth fell on his lap, he came by his wealth honestly because God's provision and kindness blessed him and yet, such blessing can still present a problem, a problem of stewardship. Parables always involve an element of surprise. Here Jesus will develop these seemingly favorable circumstances in a disturbing and unexpected direction.

Concerned with self-indulgence

The predominant presence of the word ‘my’ and the numerous first-person singular verbs give us the first hint of a problem. In just three short verses describing his thoughts, the rich man in the parable said ‘I’ six times and ‘my’ five times. My fruit, my barn, my goods. I will do, I will tear down, I will store. Such language points to an ingrained selfishness. He seems to be preoccupied only with himself. Everything is about ‘I’ and ‘my’. There is no indication that he gave thought to the needs of others or that he thanked God for His blessing. While there is nothing wrong with the man’s rejoicing in his crop or building to make storage, there is something wrong with the fact that his attention was solely upon himself.

Notice another thing. We read in v. 19, *I will say to my **soul**, “**Soul**, you have many goods laid up for many years...* Look at that. In spite of his wealth, this fellow still has some interest in his soul. He is not completely without concern for the non-material things. But his mistake is to think that the soul can be satisfied with material goods.

‘After all,’ he said to himself, ‘what is the point of working so hard if you don’t want to enjoy yourself at the end of it? I have a big bank account now. I’m going to sit back and enjoy my good fortune.’ He had laid up good things for himself and now he wants to spend it all on himself. *Take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.* If life is about the accumulation of wealth, then this man’s reaction is perfectly understandable. But the problem with this philosophy of taking one’s ease, eating, drinking, and being merry is that it is solely focused on the temporal. There is absolutely no eternal perspective. What do we mean by ‘eternal perspective’? This man has sought to secure his future without reference to God. He has not reckoned on his answerability to God for his life.

You fool!

God criticizes the man for adopting such philosophy. He calls him, ‘fool’. By the standards of this world, he may be considered as a wise person. But from the spiritual point of view, he is a fool. Here we are dealing with spiritual foolishness.

In Greek, this word ‘fool’, *aphron*, is made up of two parts. The front part is the privative *a*, which means ‘without.’ The other part is *phren*, which means ‘mind’. So a fool is a person ‘without mind,’ ‘without understanding.’ The rich man is a fool in the sense that he is lacking in spiritual understanding. Why is the rich man without spiritual understanding? What wrong did he do? Let’s read a verse in Paul’s writings that will help us understand the scriptural meaning of foolishness.

*2Corinthians 12.6. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a **fool**; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.*

Paul is saying, ‘I don’t wish to boast. But if I had to boast, I will not be a fool.’ The word ‘fool’ here means someone who is out of touch with reality, out of touch with the facts. He does not have a grip with the facts. When Paul says, ‘I will not be a fool,’ he is making reference to his rivals who had an exaggerated opinion of themselves that had little or no foundation in reality. ‘If I were to boast,’ Paul says, ‘unlike these people, I would be speaking the truth. I would not be out of touch with the facts of who I am in reality.’

Our successful man in the parable, though he might have been very clever humanly speaking, did not get the facts right – the facts of spiritual reality. He made his plans without taking into account God’s plans. Therefore he is described as a fool. He did not understand the situation. He did not come

to grips with the facts of life. He had come to grips with only one aspect of life, i.e., the material life. But he had overlooked an entire area of human existence, namely the spiritual aspect of it.

If physical matter is the only reality, if life is to be found in material possessions, then the attitude of the rich man makes perfect sense. 'You have secured your financial future. Take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.' But the truth of the matter is that human existence does not consist in the abundance of the things a person possesses. Though riches may be enjoyable in the short term, they will not exist forever. If you can face honestly the fact that this world is transient and passing away, that the things which we work so hard for will one day end, then perhaps, you will choose to go for the things which are eternal. And what are the things which are eternal? Paul says, 'The things which are seen are transient. But the things which are not seen, the things which pertain to God, they are eternal (2Corinthians 4.18).' This man is a fool because he acted as if there were no eternal tomorrow. His life was entirely focused on the temporal.

Called to give an account

The years of ease this man eagerly anticipates are suddenly cut short by the One who has authority over his life. God said to him, *This night your soul will be required of you* (v. 20). In other words, he will die that night. As the story ends, the foolishness of the farmer's materialistic aims is highlighted by the contrast between his many years of supply and the few hours of life that remained to him. It was this erroneous mind-set, this foolishness that Jesus was getting at when He asked His audience, *For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul* (Matthew 16:26)? What is the use of having all the riches of the world if he is going to lose his soul? That is really a bad bargain.

God calls the man to give an account of all his wealth. He wants a bank balance of his earthly and spiritual possessions. But the situation does not look too good for him. This rich farmer had piled up his produce in barns and had accumulated sufficient wealth to last for many years. However because he was concerned for no one but himself and had failed to account for the will of God, his spiritual bank account registered zero. His attitude has left him empty as far as God was concerned. The day will come when all persons will have to stand before God and give an account. This parable makes it clear that the mere possession of riches does not bring accreditation before God.

Then the Lord asks this ironic and tragic question. *Whose will those things be which you have provided?* 'These possessions, whose is it going to be?' The point of the question is that the one person who will not enjoy the ownership is the man. He will not even benefit from his riches. How often do we read in the obituaries that so and so left behind a big amount of money. They stored up all that money and in the end, whose is it going to be? Certainly not the dead. *For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out* (1Timothy 6:7).

Being rich toward God

Jesus concludes the parable with an application. He tells us that this is the fate of all those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God. If you want to be rich, understand that the right way of being rich is to be rich toward God. How is one rich toward God? A few verses later, Jesus gives us the key to understand God's kind of treasure.

Luke 12:33 Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves purses which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys.

34 "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

'Provide for yourselves a treasure in heaven.' Give what you have to those in need, and then you will have riches with God. That is where it counts.

We see the same concept of laying up treasure in heaven by giving away earthly treasure in 1 Timothy 6:18-19. *Instruct them* (cf. v. 17, ‘the rich in this world’) *to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.* Those who are wealthy are told to be rich in good deeds, quick to share, quick to part with their assets for kingdom causes, and in doing so they lay up treasures in heaven. They become rich toward God.

Jesus leaves us with the choice: a life wasted in pursuit of wealth on earth, or a life invested in the pursuit of wealth in heaven. Every heartbeat brings us closer to eternity. The person whose treasure is on earth is always headed away from his treasure. He will lose it. The person whose treasure is in heaven is always headed toward his treasure. He will keep it forever.

This is the principle that Jesus taught in John 12:25: *He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates (or loses) his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal.* If you try to save your life, your soul in this world, i.e. by worldly means, by getting material possessions for yourself, you will lose it. (The words ‘soul’ and ‘life’ are the same in Greek). That is what happened to the rich farmer in our parable. But if you are prepared to hate your soul in the sense of losing what you have for the sake of the kingdom, you will gain it unto eternal life.

It is harder for the rich

It is often mentioned by commentators that the issue in the parable is not wealth, but how wealth is directed. The story does not imply that material things are wrong in themselves, but only when they become the focus and goal of life.

This being said, we should also add that money is not a neutral entity. It can be a dangerous source of attraction. Not only Jesus sounded a sober warning against ‘all kinds of greed,’ He also stressed that wealth is potentially a subtle, but devastating obstacle to God. How? Because money has a way of causing a person to focus inwardly and thus, distracting him from the things of God. In the parable of the sower, Jesus explained that ‘those one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of riches choke it, making it unfruitful (Matthew 13:22).’ Notice. Wealth choked the word. In that sense, we can say that the life of the rich farmer was choked by his wealth.

You see, the rich are in a way at a spiritual disadvantage. That is Jesus’ point in Matthew 19:23-24. *Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.* This doesn’t mean of course that the wealthy man is more sinful than the poor. The problem is that the rich has more things that can potentially take his attention away from God. It is harder for him to see the need to love God. He simply has too much else to love already.

The law of gravity tells us that the greater the mass the greater the hold that mass exerts. This explains why the largest planets are capable of holding so many satellites in orbit. Similarly, the more things we own – the greater their total mass – the more they grip us, hold us, set us in orbit around them. In the end, like a black hole, they mercilessly suck us into themselves, they ‘choke’ us, until we become indistinguishable from these things.

Dazzled by his riches and the prospect of having more, the farmer in our parable lived out his life on earth as if this were all there is, failing to prepare for the life to come. One day, sooner than he expected, he found out that he was wrong. When God called him, he was faced with the fact that all the wealth in the world could do nothing for him. The accounts were closed and could not be altered.

We who are alive need to make the right kind of investments, with our eyes set on eternity – while it is still not too late for us.