

Sermon File # 598

Scripture Text: Luke 12:13-21

Sermon Title: *The Parable of the Rich Fool*

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The Parable of the Rich Fool

Introduction:

Open your Bibles to Luke 12:13-21. Last Sunday we focused on Jesus' teaching his disciples about prayer. Now in chapter 12, Jesus is once again teaching his disciples about how to live trustingly and boldly in the power of the Spirit. Only by depending on the Spirit of God will they be able to faithfully witness in an environment of opposition and even persecution. Although Jesus is speaking particularly in the first verses of the chapter to his disciples, they are surrounded by a large crowd ("many thousands," verse 1) which seems to be listening in on his words addressed to the disciples.

As we see in our text, Jesus is suddenly and 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 does not 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 disciples, but also to this great, and at times ("trampling on one another") unruly crowd. The heart of Jesus' reply to this man who wants Jesus to settle a property dispute with his brother is Jesus' parable of the rich fool.

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

During his three years of public ministry, our Lord worked miracles of nature and of healing, even raising the dead. He taught his disciples but he also preached, such as the great Sermon on the Mount and here in our text for today. Someone might argue that not only was he the greatest of all preachers, but Jesus was a “Baptist preacher,” because he didn’t miss an opportunity to preach on money! When the man interrupted Jesus’ teaching his disciples with his request for Jesus to help him get his part of the family inheritance, Jesus replied with one of his great parables, a story that illustrates a kingdom of God truth.

One Sunday during our most recent US pastorate about 5 or 6 years ago, a young man whom I had never met came up to me following a stewardship sermon I had just preached. He was obviously agitated as he complained that he had visited several different churches during the past few weeks and every sermon had been on giving. Obviously, his point was that money was all that churches were concerned about anymore. My response was, “Maybe the Lord is trying to tell you something.”

It’s interesting that Jesus spoke more about material wealth than about any other subject other than the kingdom of God (See Richard Foster, *Money, Sex and Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life*, page 19). 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 the devotion to him alone (See Matthew 6:24, ESV footnote, and Peter H Davids, “Rich and Poor: ‘The Danger of Wealth,’” page 705, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, edited by Joel Green, et al.)

Just as with the young man who could not elude sermons on giving, so we, if willing to consider the entire range of Jesus’ teachings, cannot ignore what Jesus would say to us about the pitfalls and dangers of the material. Just like the first disciples, we are not prepared for living and serving faithfully in the kingdom of God if we have not 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.

Just this past Saturday morning I was sickened to watch an American tel-evangelist, broadcasting from California, as he worked his audience into a fever pitch, by getting 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 is doing by exploiting his audiences for his own financial gain. I was saddened to think that people here 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 “Watch out! Beware!” (verse 15). Jesus warned that...

➤ **Riches can be a divider**

The man in the crowd interrupted Jesus’ teaching with his request for Jesus’ 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 divided from his brother and so told a parable, a story about another man who had become divided because of his wealth and greed. Jesus warned that riches can leave us...

- *Divided in mind*

The man in the crowd was so divided and distracted in his thinking that he wasn’t even listening to what Jesus was teaching. Jesus had been teaching about the Holy Spirit (verse 12) and suddenly this man asks Jesus to help him get his inheritance settlement resolved. There may well be one or two in the congregation today who are not even aware that I’m preaching about money because you are too preoccupied and divided in your thoughts about your own financial situation!

This man knew his Scriptural rights and knowing 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.” I believe that tithing remains as a valid measurement for giving, for example. But the New Testament simply assumes that our giving will take us beyond the minimal 10% and that we will give as God prospers, will give in faith and will give generously and even

sacrificially. And Jesus cares about the motive for our giving. Certainly Jesus would condemn the attitude of the man in my home country (USA) who sued his church to reclaim his past years' tithe because God had not prospered him financially as his pastor's sermons had promised.

On this Father's Day, with our son and his fiancée attending our service today, I must relate an incident from his childhood. When 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 every kid on the block had a Big Wheel, they all wanted the opportunity to ride on Darren's. I was outside working in the front yard ("garden" to you Europeans), 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 relied 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. And also, as between Kyle and Darren and the men in our Scripture we can become...

- *Divided in relationships*

An interesting play on words is with the verb "divide" and the noun "divider." The man asks Jesus to tell his brother to divide the inheritance with him (verse 13). Jesus replies a bit gruffly, "Man, who appointed me a judge or arbiter (literally divider) between you?" (verse 14). Jesus came to be a reconciler between God and people alienated by sin and also to reconcile us with one another. But this man had allowed his greed over a property settlement to alienate him. He had failed to see his responsibility to live with his brother in unity (Psalm 133:1). The ideal would have been for him and his brother to have continued to live on and share together undivided property. Thus Jesus told the parable about another alienated man.

Jesus introduced the parable with his warning about greed, an insatiable desire for things that is never satisfied. And when people think of life's meaning as wrapped up in the material, then they become divided. The way of success in the eyes of the world is to pursue goals, regardless of the ways people might be alienated and hurt or separated from us in the process. In the parable a man becomes victim of his own good fortune. He is faced with a dilemma—what to do with a bumper crop. Remember, he is a wealthy farmer surrounded by poor farmers who live on a subsistence economy. But he takes no thought for others. He thinks to himself and he acts by himself and he even talks to himself! And this was in a culture when everyone traditionally talked with everyone else in the village and sought and trusted the advice of other villagers and farmers (See

Kenneth E Bailey, *Poet & Peasant through Peasant Eyes: A Literary and Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, page 65).

I think it's important to realize that Jesus was addressing a group of disciples and a crowd of people who by comparison were much poorer than most 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 get rich*” and (who) “fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction” (1 Timothy 6:9). None of us is immune from the seductive and divisive power of riches. In this same 12th Chapter of Luke Jesus gives great comfort and encouragement about how he will take care of his followers, even providing the material things that we need (verses 22ff).

Jesus is our provider but he is not our financial assistant who is 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. Jesus came to be a reconciler and to enable us to ward off the grip of Mammon and to be free to use material resources to share with others in need. Thus, he told the sad parable of a man whose wealth made him selfishly alienated, as the man who made the request was divided in his mind and heart.

Jesus warned also that...

➤ **Riches can be a deceiver**

Jesus knew that the man in the crowd was being deceived by his mistaken value of the material side of life. And so he told the parable about another man who was deceived by riches. Greed deceives the heart about the reality of life. In fact, Jesus used a harsh word for this rich man; Jesus called him a fool.

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 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 wealth is based on one's material assets. This is cultural deception. Notice that 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 agri-businessman. Surrounded by poor subsistence farmers, this man was a success by anyone's standards. Were he

alive today, he probably would be invited to appear on one of the many CNBC Europe 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. As one commentator noted, not only was he shrewd, but his practices were heartless, inconsiderate and “monstrous” (see Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT, pages 490-491).

The men 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 matter,” that there is no spiritual dimension, particularly no kingdom of God. The highest value of life lies in material well-being, thus justifying “a preoccupation with or stress upon material things rather than intellectual or spiritual things” (See “materialism” in *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). These men were living life as mere “bios,” a physical existence with no regard for the higher life, the word used by Jesus in verse 15, “zoe,” a word that refers to the full human experience. They were living as though this mortal life is all that there is, and as a result were missing out on the greatest joys and fulfillment that this life on earth has to offer.

And they were...

- *Deceived about responsibility*

In a way, these men were an embodiment, a personification of an entire culture and society caught up in the pursuit of material gain. It was Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) who said wryly that civilization is a “limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities” (Quoted by Warren Wiersbe, *Luke 1-13: Be Compassionate: A Call to Be more Like the Savior*, page 137f). Our society and culture will be judged for our rampant consumerism and greedy amassing of wealth and spending of the world’s natural resources, in total disregard for the rest of the world. But also, we as individuals are responsible with the wealth that has been entrusted to us.

In Richard Foster’s book, *Money, Sex and Power*, he commented that anyone who could afford to buy his book is likely far wealthier than most of the people in the world (See above citation). You and I are responsible to God and to others with the wealth that has been entrusted to us.

Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, a right worldly bunch of Christians, said that as followers of Christ we are 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 Thessalonians 2:6-10; 2 Corinthians 9:11 and Ephesians 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" (Page 208, NT vol. III, Luke: *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*). He had no thought at all for God's kingdom. I think of the imagery the Prophet Malachi used for the kingdom of God, when he said we are to bring all of God's tithes into his "storehouse" (Malachi 3:10). Certainly in our use of wealth we are responsible to support the work of the kingdom of God, a work primarily entrusted to the local churches, it seems to me. The rich man, instead of seeking to give to God and his kingdom causes, decided to build bigger barns and storehouses for himself.

In all likelihood the rich man also was taking no thought for his family, who seemed isolated from him. It appears he was planning to squander everything on himself, whereas the Scripture says "a good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children" (Proverbs 13:22).

He was deceived about his responsibility and he was also...

- *Deceived about accountability*

The man in the parable was under the illusion that he was accountable only to himself. He was oblivious about his accountability to God and that he would someday leave behind his wealth and stand face to face before God. Again, Jesus called him a fool.

We are created in God's image and thus we are immortal souls, though we now dwell in mortal bodies. We have eternal destinies. And the location and condition of our eternal destiny depends on how we relate in this life to the Lord God, to whom we must give an account. This Jesus also makes very clear in his parable about the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

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 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. Thus "God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life (Greek psuche, "soul") will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' (verse 20). Our very souls are on loan from God. We are not our own, whether we acknowledge God's ownership or not (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). And each one of us, believer and unbeliever alike, will give an account before the judgment seat of Christ (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10)

And so this rich fool was to discover that...

➤ **Riches can be a destroyer**

The man in Jesus' parable was a fool for sure, failing to see that riches called Mammon, is not a neutral commodity that has no effect on our soul and our spiritual life. Riches can indeed, apart from God's redeeming grace and protection, be a destroyer.

I recall seeing a bumper sticker, usually on the rear bumper of expensive sports cars in my home country (USA), which read: "The one who dies with the most toys wins." 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. See Revelation 9:11 and NIV footnote)

The rich man was a fool for failing to see in his hoarded wealth the seeds of...

- *Self-destruction*

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. And whether anything remained of his wealth at all, we know that eventually his wealth was decimated. 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 Corinthians 4:18). Although the everlasting kingdom, the realm of the new heaven and earth, will be this "groaning" creation remade for eternity, Peter reminds us that what we now see is destined for the fire of judgment (2 Peter 3:10).

But more importantly, the rich man failed to see that within his own person there was taking place a horrible...

- *Soul destruction*

The rich fool's soul (verse 20, ESV) was required of him. Already he had, even while living, forfeited real life (verse 23, zoe, vis-à-vis bios). He had destroyed his spiritual life, his capacity for repenting of self and sin and relating to God as his Master, even while he was selfishly hoarding his wealth. Even while he was alive, biologically speaking, he became spiritually dead and perhaps an unpardonable sinner (I think this is what Jesus means by "blasphemy against the Spirit." The person whose heart is hardened beyond remedial responsiveness to the Holy Spirit has become spiritually incorrigible (Matthew 12:31-32).

Mammon, selfish, insatiable greed, is an idol that destroys a person spiritually and left unchecked, takes a soul to spiritual death in this life and eternal

destruction in the life to come. And soul apart from a relationship with God is destined to always be dissatisfied. As someone has said, if you could pour all of the world's wealth into an empty soul apart from God it would still be dissatisfied.

John D Rockefeller, one of the richest men in American history, was asked how much money it takes to be satisfied and he answered, "A little bit more."

Mammon is a soul-destroying idol and false, lying God. And Jesus said to his disciples, after the sad departure of the rich young ruler, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed 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" (Luke 18:24-25). The disciples were bewildered by this and so Jesus explained that only the grace of God can extricate someone from the grip of material greed and enable someone to be spiritually separated from great wealth, with has a sinister power to seduce, divide and destroy. Grace alone, which comes by living under the Lordship of Christ, can tame the wild beast of material greed and the insatiable desire for things. As someone remarked, the real tragedy of the rich fool was not what he left behind but rather what lay before him—eternity without God (Warren Wiersbe, above citation, page 139).

Jesus seems to be saying that the only remedy to soul-destruction from the material is a soul-saving relationship with God, by which we focus on his wealth and our riches in him (verse 21). One way to understand this saying is that Jesus is calling 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 has entrusted to us (Luke 16:9). Pensions and long-term investments, as you know, are never entirely safe. Without doubt, the safest long-term investment that Nancy and I have made in our nearly 40 years of marriage has been what we have given to the work of God's kingdom.

And we become rich towards God eternally as we lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, as Jesus admonishes us to do (Matthew 6:19). This is not the "heavenly materialism" of wanting a bigger reward, maybe a bigger mansion and more gold on our heavenly driveway than our neighbor. It's the desire to know more of God's glory in heaven by becoming more like Jesus here on earth. In CS Lewis' words, it's not the reward of a mercenary who fights for his country for material reward, but the reward of a patriot—freedom won for his beloved country. We seek to be rich in God by means of the reward of greater godliness and glory in heaven as a result of godly character and Christ-ward living in this world. After warning Timothy of the dangers of material greed gives the antidote of becoming rich toward God: But you, man of God, flee from all this (the love of money, in the previous verse), and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness" (1Timothy 6:11). In other words, seek after being rich toward God (Luke 12:21).

Conclusion:

The man in the crowd was probably sorry that he had interrupted Jesus' sermon! He got more of an answer than he wanted. All he really wanted was for Jesus to just pronounce his older brother "guilty" for not giving him his share of the inheritance. But instead he gets a sermon. And we too had better be careful we don't ask Jesus to give us what's coming to us. We're likely to get a sermon. He knows the true condition of our hearts. What appears to those who might admire us for financial prudence might actually, in heaven's clearer judgment, be nothing but foolish greed.

Years ago, when our children were small and we were serving a church in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, we hosted a visit from an Englishman friend of my brother, who had been this layman's pastor in Germany. This gentleman at the time was a successful businessman in Germany who was in Cleveland on a business trip. To thank us for our hospitality, he offered to take Nancy and me to dinner in a nice restaurant of our choice. So we arranged for a baby sitter, reasoning that a nice dinner would compensate for what we would have to pay out of our modest income, modest at least in comparison with this successful businessman.

So, we went out to The Blue Boar and enjoyed a nice meal and good fellowship with this Christian chap. And it came time to pay the bill. Now, you have to appreciate the Southern way of etiquette in the USA, which has a somewhat ostentatious and artificial form of courtesy. We say things and make offers that are sometimes less than sincere, like inviting someone to one's house, while hoping they never accept. I was brought up in the culture of the Old South, which was reinforced at mealtime. I was taught that if there was one piece of chicken left over, the one most desirous of eating it, would first offer it to everyone else, who inherently knew that the one offering was hoping no one else would dare take it. But it was a courtesy to offer anyway before eating it yourself, which was your intention all along. Nancy, on the other hand, grew up in the Midwest, and if you offered the last piece of chicken to the family, someone was bound to say, "Sure, I'll take it!"

Well, I spoke out of *my* Southern US culture, and when the waiter brought the bill, I knew we were our friend's guests, and that surely he would pay, regardless of any "formal" offer I might make to pay the bill. So, feeling quite confident that our friend would pay, I said, as I reached for the check, "Here, let me pay it." "As you wish," he replied. The check was mine, and I had no means to pay it. I'm sure this good man was unaware of our predicament, and I was too proud to admit it to him. At that time we had no credit cards, and Nancy and I had an impromptu meeting away from the table, and arranged for the manager to let us write a personal check.

I have told this story to countless friends, who always are amused by our hapless dilemma brought about by our “inadvertent” generosity. As it turned out, we the ones with a modest income gave to a much wealthier man. But God made a way for us. In fact, God has always provided the needs of our family, and Nancy and I can testify that not only has God faithfully met our needs. His blessings, even materially, have overflowed, and he has always given that we might have to give to others. From the beginning of our marriage, when living on a shoestring budget, we committed ourselves to tithe. And we have continued to tithe to the church and then give additional offerings beyond to special opportunities that arise regularly. As much as we think we give faithfully, we still realize that our giving falls short of being sacrificial so much of the time.

But one time I told the above story (of our falling into the cultural trap of paying the dinner tab for our wealthy “host”) to a large gathering of my family, and all but one were greatly amused. One member of the family, who is now deceased, and to our knowledge never gave much assurance of faith in Christ, expressed anger when I told the story. “Roger, you’re a fool!” was his outburst. And to this person, giving, particularly when it is illogical and unreasonably generous, was totally foolish. I knew from his own statement years before that his goal in life was to acquire financial wealth. In this man’s eyes, anyone who would give what he could not afford, or who would give to someone wealthier than he, was foolish. But that’s what Jesus did. He impoverished himself below any person, and made us rich through his poverty.

I’m certainly not purporting my unintended generosity as an example of good management or kingdom giving, but the story shows the difference of perspective. The real fool in Jesus’ eyes is the person who lives for the here and now, for the acquisition of the temporal, forgetful of the eternal. May we all seek to measure our attitudes and spending, saving and giving habits by the standard of Jesus, who calls us to trust him as Provider, to share generously with others and to seek to be rich towards God. The choice is: Are we willing to risk looking like fools before the world to avoid being fools in the eyes of God?

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Why do you think Jesus had so much to say about money and our attitude toward the material?
2. In what ways can the quest for material wealth divide in one's relationships with God? With others?
3. What are the fundamental realities about material wealth that we are likely to forget in day-to-day living, spending and saving?
4. What are some of the deceptive values that the secular culture places upon material wealth?
5. List the responsibilities that you have in the use of your money and material goods.
6. What are some of the wisest and safest investments that we as Christians can make?
7. What do you think Jesus meant by being "rich toward God"? (verse 21)

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