

## More to Life

Luke 12:13-21

Last month I received an advertisement from my insurance company. It said that it is assumed that I will need money for at least 18 years of retirement; and over \$90,000 each to assist Isaac and Gabriel with their college educations. Also last week I was by my credit union and they are willing to lend me money at 6% interest so that Leroy and I can take a yearly vacation. So this issue of money and inheritance is not just about a bible character in a parable by Jesus; but is also an issue for you and me.

As we have read in your hearing the centerpiece of this passage is the parable of the rich fool, a person who is more concerned with storing excess riches than with striving for God's realm. Framed on either side by Jesus' teaching, the parable paints a vivid image of the dangers of wealth for its own sake. Those who have possessions in abundance risk the sin of greed: "enough" is never enough, "more" is only to be hoarded, and "I, me, and mine" matter more than anybody else. Greed is a problem primarily because its focus on the self keeps people from being "rich toward God" and rich toward others. Our human tendency toward greed stands in striking contrast to God's beneficial care for rich and poor alike, as well as Jesus' instructions in the book of Luke concerning the appropriate stewardship of our possessions.

The man's barns were already bursting at the seams. Now he harvests a bumper crop with no place to store it. As he was desperate to keep this bounty for himself, and not being one to concern himself with the problem of waste, he plans to tear down the old barns, construct larger ones, store up his crops, and then sit back and enjoy the excess. This farmer stands as a negative example for the followers of Jesus: if you want to know how *not* to live as a disciple, just be like this person.

Those of us who read and hear the parable might ask, what is so wrong with storing the overrun of crops? Frugal-minded folk have always stashed excess food and supplies in silos,

pantries, and basement shelves; we have saved for rainy days, we have squirreled away funds for retirement, and some of us even have hidden dollar bills under and in our mattresses. Isn't this a prudent hedge against future economic uncertainty? After all, this is precisely what the young Joseph advises Pharaoh after interpreting a dream about seven years of plenty and seven years of famine (Gen. 41:17-36). Joseph said store up the excess in the fat years so that there will be enough for everybody in the lean ones. Also, doesn't this man deserve to "eat, drink, and be merry" in celebration of his extreme good fortune? We find numerous feasts and parties throughout the Bible giving evidence for the practice of celebrating the harvest or rejoicing at signs of good fortune.

In answer to our questions: saving for future material needs is one component of proper stewardship of God's bounty. Appropriate concern for the future is balanced, however, with the instructions to give glory to God and to care for one's neighbor, to provide for the poor and the marginalized, for those without access to the world's wealth or even to basic needs of survival. Did you notice that the man in the parable demonstrates neither of these aspects of stewardship—he didn't give thanks to God, nor did he demonstrate care for his neighbor. He seemed to have become so focused on himself that he had forgotten both the God who caused the earth's bounty and the neighbor without access to that bounty. Did you notice that his words were only "I," "me," and "my"? He showed concern only for himself, not for his neighbors, for those who have no land to produce their own crops, for the alien, the widow, and the orphan at the margins of society (e.g., Exod. 22:21-22), for any whose lives were at risk due to their limited access to resources. The man in the parable is so self-centered, however, that he cannot see beyond what he considers to be "his" harvest, "his" barns, and "his own" life. Throughout the development of the church over the centuries, the act of giving to the poor remains a central element of the consecrated and blessed life.

Jesus speaks about at least two other issues in this parable. First is the reminder that God is the author of life and death, as well as the creator of a land that produces food for its inhabitants. It is divine providence that has made possible the excess crops. The man in the

parable ignored the hand of God in his good fortune and focused only on the benefit he had received. Nowhere did he offer thanksgiving to God for the abundance of his land.

Second, the man seemed to have forgotten that all created life is bounded by death, a reality that comes to bear whatever the quantity of one's possessions. In the end, and sooner rather than later, death will separate him from his overflowing barns. "You cannot take it with you," so the popular saying goes; alternatively, we might say, "there are no storage facilities in heaven." Despite barns filled to the brim, the man's days were numbered, a fact he seemed to have forgotten as he congratulated himself for his fine lot in life.

With all this excess at the center of his life, the man plunged into the trap of idolatry, an idolatry that is often idolized by our culture. The nearly constant message of today's media is that life consists in the abundance of our possessions. We are encouraged to spend more, have more, and use more; to supersize and maximize; to bank on the appearance of wealth as a sign of the good life. Our culture cultivates a tendency to buy things we do not need, and it champions a way of life that this parable characterizes as folly.

You might say you are not talking to me because I'm doing my best just living paycheck to paycheck. You are talking about storing excess and you are trying to keep body and breathe today. You may be one who can't afford to play the lottery because you need every dollar you have to live. This message is still for you. I have thought many times that if I had money life would be good. The parable reminds us the promise of wealth in the future is still seductive. This parable calls on all, rich and poor alike, to reflect carefully about what we want and why we want it. Are our desires and standards for what is enough driven by a determination to store up treasures for our own pleasure, or by our understanding of God's blessings and our true purpose in life? Will we measure our lives by the standards of the media, seducing us to want more and more, or by the call of the gospel to be rich toward God? (**Audrey West**)

This year has been financially challenging in some ways. In January I begin working 4 days per week at my job at Goodwill. At the same time I have been convicted by the fact that I have been working a minimum 6 days per week for more than 3 years. Because of the

decrease in salary I prayed that I would have the faith and trust to continue the same level of stewardship that I had before. My praise report is that God is faithful. We have lacked for nothing!

On another note I have thought lately of what it means to be rich toward God. I told you last week that my aunt died in Louisville, KY. Although I was not able to attend the memorial service one sister and a brother said it was a wonder celebration of Aunt Ida's life. She did not have great amounts of the world's goods, having lived 33 years beyond her retirement, but she had a great legacy of love for God, love for family and love for her neighbor. On Friday I attended another memorial service for a colleague who died at age 43. We all took comfort in hearing his co-worker and family talk about how he devoted his life to helping others. He did not have much of the world's goods, but he was rich toward God.

Jesus' conclusion (v. 21) rounds out his words about our insatiable greed (verse 15). Jesus warns us about the outcome for one whose life was the abundance of their possessions; the fate of one who stockpiled for himself and was not rich toward God. Did you see that Jesus did not tell us what being rich toward God entails, but Luke tells us in other places? Life is more than our resources; being rich toward God entails using our resources for the benefit of our neighbor in need, as the Samaritan did in Luke 10:25-37. Life is more than doing whatever we want; being rich toward God includes intentionally listening to Jesus' word, as Mary of Bethany did in Luke 10:38-42. Life is more than trusting in ourselves; we are to be rich toward God by prayerfully trusting that God will provide for the needs of life (11:1-13; 12:22-31). Life is more than our resources; as being rich toward God involves selling possessions and giving alms as a means of establishing a lasting treasure in heaven (12:32-34).

The man in the parable and people who emulate his pattern of life are fools for leading isolated, self-absorbed lives, because everything they have given themselves ends with death. Life is not had by the possessions one has. Life and possessions are a gift of God to be used to advance God's agenda of care and compassion, precisely for those who lack resources to provide for themselves. **(Richard P. Carlson)**

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