

SERIES: Parables from the Master Story-Teller
 SERMON: **How Do You Become Rich Toward God?**
 SCRIPTURE: Luke 12:13-21
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
 DATE: June 12, 2005

Last Fall we examined a very strange parable from the mouth of Jesus as found in Luke 16:1-9—the story of a man who used his money to buy friends. While the man himself was a scoundrel, Jesus presents him as a positive example of what Christians should do in one area of their lives—invest their money in friends. The particular kind of friends Jesus is concerned about are those who will welcome us into Heaven, i.e. people who have become believers because we made an investment, either directly or indirectly, in reaching them with the Gospel.

Today we come to another parable—the story of a man who did the opposite of the shrewd manager. He didn't invest in people at all; he invested only in himself. This man, though perhaps a more moral person than the dishonest manager, receives none of the commendation Jesus offers that man. Jesus calls that bad man shrewd; He calls this good man stupid (He actually uses the Greek word for “fool” meaning ignorant or idiotic).

I once saw a bumper sticker on the back of a Porsche, “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” Talk about stupid! He who dies, still dies; and he faces judgment. Unfortunately that bumper sticker seems to describe the hedonistic philosophy of a lot of people in our day. The acquisition of “things” and the pursuit of pleasure is, for many, the driving force and measuring rod of a successful life. And it was that way in Jesus' day, too. In Luke 16 we read that the Pharisees were lovers of money, and they sneered at Jesus when He taught that we cannot serve both God and Money. Their teaching was that “whom the Lord loveth He maketh rich,” and they saw no contradiction between godliness and greed.

But Jesus answers here with a philosophy that is the polar opposite: “A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” This statement is given within the context of the parable of the Rich Fool. It's found in Luke 12, and I want us to begin our reading in verse 13:

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

Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" 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."

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

"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. 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."'

"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?'

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

toward God."

If you look back at the early part of this chapter, you find that Jesus is teaching a crowd of many thousands. His subjects include hypocrisy, hell, God's providence, the unpardonable sin, and persecution—serious subjects for serious disciples to think about. But right in the middle of this important discourse one guy in the crowd raises his hand to get Jesus' attention: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

I don't know where this man's mind is, but he obviously isn't tracking with Jesus. I suspect he is obsessed with this conflict with his brother, and during a pause in Jesus' discourse he seizes the opportunity to get this popular rabbi's attention and ask Him to solve his problem for him. The dispute most likely has to do with an inheritance of land. I suppose his father had died and left the farm to this man and his brother. They worked the land for a while but eventually got into a dispute, so this son decides to split. But he can't afford to unless he gets his share out of the land. The brother doesn't want to sell part of the farm because there won't be enough left to make a living.

The petitioner is so sure he's right he doesn't ask for justice; he doesn't even ask for arbitration; he just asks Jesus to rule in his favor and settle the dispute. But Jesus declines. He says, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" What He means is that He did not come as a justice of the peace to settle mundane disputes. He came to point the way to God and to make sure people knew how to make peace with *Him*. (At His Second Coming He will indeed become the righteous and final Judge over all mankind and all their disputes, but this is not His calling during His incarnation).

Jesus, however, does not ignore the man's question entirely; instead He seizes upon it as a teachable moment and immediately turns His discourse to the subject of greed. He sees the man's question as caused by a spirit of avarice for the things of this world. Instead of just dealing with the symptom, he goes to the root problem.

The Parable of the Rich Fool (16-20)

This is a rather jarring story, and immediately our defenses tend to go up when we sense someone is messing with our wallet. I wouldn't be surprised if someone right now isn't thinking, "The pastor's going to tell us that if we're successful and save for the future, we're not trusting God, and that we ought to give everything to the church before we die and lose it anyway." Well, that's not what this sermon is about, and to prove it I want to start by sharing with you what this parable doesn't teach.

What this parable does *not* teach:

First, it does not condemn wealth. There are a lot of wealthy people in the Bible who are commended, not rebuked. Job, Abraham, David, Solomon—there's quite a list. Wealth *per se* is never treated as a liability in the Bible.

Second, it does not condemn entrepreneurship or success. There was nothing innately wrong with this man's decision to pull down his barns and build bigger ones. Initiative, planning, success—these traits are never condemned by the Lord. God gives some people ambition, drive, and creativity, and we don't need to apologize for success in the business world or in church work if we have been honest and kept our priorities straight.

Third, it does not even condemn the enjoyment of wealth. This rich man's counsel to himself to "take life easy; eat, drink and be merry," is not that far from what Paul suggests in 1 Tim. 6 when he says that God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." This rich man does not have to feel guilty about the good things his wealth provides to make his life pleasant.

But obviously Jesus *is* using this man as a negative example of *something*. What was his problem, if it was not that he was wealthy, or that he wanted to see continued growth in his business, or that he wanted to enjoy the fruits of his labor? Well, that's a good question and I will try to answer it, but first I want to be sure we understand that this parable is not about Howard Hughes or Donald Trump or Phil Ruffin. Or maybe I should say, it's not *just* about such people. It's about you, and it's about me. Jesus is speaking to a crowd of many thousands of ordinary people, according to verse 1 of chapter 12. He's not addressing Jerusalem's Civic Progress or the Fortune 500's CEO's. He's addressing all of us.

Now I realize there is probably no one in this room this morning who thinks of himself or herself as financially loaded, because we always reserve such terminology for those more wealthy than we are, but the fact is there are very few in this room who are not wealthy. I doubt if there is one person in this room who is not in the top 5% of the world's population in terms of wealth.

What this parable *does* teach:

Wealth is a gift from God. "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop." Do you see that? The *ground* of a certain rich man produced a good crop. This guy wasn't necessarily a genius; he may not even have been a particularly hard worker. He was just blessed in that God gave him an abundant crop. God is the one who makes the land rich, who sends the rain, and who produces a harvest. Farmers understand that. But we don't have too many farmers here today. So let's paraphrase the message: "The practice of a certain physician was increasing", or "the commissions of a certain salesman were going through the roof," or "the investments of a certain retired person were beating the Dow by a significant margin." That's the scene.

Wealthy people tend to take the credit for their success, but I'm always troubled when I hear stories about self-made people—fabulously wealthy people who were born in poverty and yet made it big—the Sam Waltons, the Bill Gateses, and the Warren Buffetts. I know there's a measure of truth in these stories. These are unusual people who deserve to be admired for their drive, fortitude, ingenuity, willingness to take risk, and competence.

But friends, these are absolutely *not* self-made people. No way. Which of them chose their own IQ's? Who decided they would be born in the US and not in Bosnia or Iraq? How come they had parents who wanted them instead of a mother who decided to abort? Who gave them healthy bodies instead of spina bifida or cystic fibrosis? These are all issues over which they had no influence at all. They didn't choose their homeland or their parents or their genes or their basic personalities. These are all gifts from their Creator. Everything we have, including wealth, is a gift from God. James 1:17 says, "*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.*"

Wealth complicates one's life. This is expressed by the man in our story when he asks, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." You say, that's a good problem to have; it's surely better than the alternative. Perhaps, but it's a problem nevertheless and a real one. He can't just let the crops rot; he has to do *something*. His life has become more complicated by his success.

I think the average person sees the wealthy as living on easy street; nothing could be further from the truth. Oh, they may have more conveniences, they may possess more toys, and they may be able to travel to places the rest of us can't, but their lives are anything but easy.

My wife grew up on a 640 acre farm just south of Andover, now Flint Hills Golf Course. The farm was owned by one of the richest men in Kansas at the time, who lived on a lake in the center of the farm in a luxurious home designed by the eccentric inventor, Buckminster Fuller. Jan's family lived in a farmhouse on one edge of the property, because her stepmother was the beloved nanny for the man's six children. The tree-lined road that led into that house in the center of the farm was actually called Easy Street, and the address was the same as the year, i.e., in 1962 when I first visited Jan there, the address was 1962 Easy Street. The next year it was 1963 Easy Street.

This family was generous; in fact, they paid for our wedding in 1964 because at the time Jan's dad was laid off from Boeing. But let me tell you a little secret. They lived on Easy Street in name only. I think their wealth purchased as much pain as pleasure—tax problems, law suits, family feuds. They could never be sure their friends were real friends or maybe just wanted a handout. Thankfully, some members of the family came to faith in Christ and discovered what true wealth is all about. One, in fact, attends our church and gave me permission to share this story.

There are other complications that wealth can produce. It forces a person into a higher tax bracket, so he has to hire a lawyer to find out how to transfer some of it into a tax shelter, which puts him under the scrutiny of the IRS, which mandates the hiring of an accountant.

Wealth also dramatically increases the number of solicitations a person receives from those who want to get into his pockets. If you and I get frustrated sometimes by the requests for contributions by phone and by mail from various and sundry charities and Christian organizations, you can't imagine what the really wealthy put up with.

Further, wealth can sometimes lead to terrible loneliness. Chuck Swindoll wrote a little pamphlet a number of years ago addressed to the peculiar needs of CEO's and other successful people. Its title is, *"The Lonely Whine of the Top Dog."* Let me read a couple of paragraphs:

"If I were to ask you to describe someone who is lonely, chances are good you would not choose someone who is busy. It is also doubtful that you'd select someone in a top management position, the chief executive officer in a growing corporation, or the leading, well-paid salesperson in an aggressive, competitive organization. "Not them!" we think. "They're successful. They've got bucks. They're fulfilled. They've got it made. Furthermore, with all those people around, they haven't got time to be lonely!"

"Don't bet on it. More often than not, those who find themselves approaching or at the top of the steep ladder of financial success have few friends (if any), struggle to keep peace at home, and live on the ragged edge of disillusionment, even despair.

"Loneliness is the plague of the loner . . . and, by and large, "top dogs" are loners. Either by design or by default, most executives operate in a very private world where happiness eludes them. Contentment and inner tranquility are seldom found in the penthouse. Instead, there is boredom and stark feelings of emptiness. As Thoreau states so well, these are (often) people who 'lead lives of quiet desperation.'"

Could it be that the rich fool of our parable suffered from loneliness? Well, look at verse 17: "He thought to himself, 'Self, what shall I do?'" This man is so isolated he doesn't have anyone to talk to, so he talks to himself. Notice the personal pronouns found in just two verses, 18 and 19: "What shall *I* do? *I* have no place to store *my* crops. 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. And *I'll* say to *myself* . . ." He's a loner if you ever saw one.

Friends, the bottom line is that wealth isn't always what it's cracked up to be. It can complicate one's life terribly.

Wealth can lead to hoarding and selfishness. It doesn't have to, but it has a tendency to, and it inevitably happens when wealth is combined with a love for money. Please understand that not every wealthy person is a lover of money. By the same token, not every poor person is free from the love of money. Wealth is an economic issue. The love of money is a character issue. As I have mentioned before, in 1 Tim. 6 the Apostle Paul deals very differently with those who are wealthy and those who want to become wealthy. He speaks very positively but cautiously to those who *are* rich, but he speaks very negatively to those who *want* to get rich, i.e. to those who are consumed with greed.

The rich fool in our story is a person who is not only wealthy but is obsessed with becoming even wealthier. He says, "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." Tear down and build bigger. Familiar as the morning paper, isn't it? St. Louis business leaders are in the process of tearing down Busch Stadium and building one with more luxury boxes, and it's not even 40 years old! Here in Wichita they've talked about tearing down the Coliseum to build something bigger and nicer. I

have a dear friend who owned a beautiful ranch house on three acres, which they sold for \$500,000. Do you know what the new owners did with it? They tore it down to build a \$1.5 million house on the lot!

A Roman proverb from the time of Jesus says, “Money is like sea water; the more a man drinks the thirstier he becomes.” And often a vicious cycle is set in motion. Dad works longer hours so he can make more money so he can buy more things so his family can be happier. But the family’s not happier, because they see less of Dad, so he works harder to buy even more things to make up for not being there. And relationships are torn down while bigger and better things are substituted in their place.

But our rich fool goes one step further. He adds, “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.’” He thinks all these things are going to satisfy the deep needs of his soul. But he’s wrong. There is a God-shaped vacuum in every soul that cannot be filled with things, especially wealth. Only God can fill it and provide the peace that passes understanding. One writer said, “If God isn’t in first place, you can’t handle success,”¹ or wealth, I might add. God certainly isn’t in first place in this man’s life. God isn’t even in sight.

Wealth hoarded is *always* left behind (and not always for the purposes we desire).

All of a sudden God enters our story in verse 20, perhaps in the form of an angelic messenger. He walks right into the man’s den where he’s leaning back in his leather recliner talking to himself and says, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” The world would call him a great success and extremely bright, but God calls him a fool; he’s ignorant; he’s stupid. He planned well for this life but totally ignored the life to come. That is the epitome of foolishness.

Whenever I read verse 20 I can’t help but think of a really nice man I knew in St. Louis. He was a top executive with a major corporation. He had a gorgeous home and an extensive investment portfolio, and he was eagerly looking forward to early retirement. But he didn’t have time to serve or to be involved in anything other than Sunday morning worship; even that was rather sporadic. Finally he had his financial ducks in a row and he retired early. He was set. He could now travel around the world with his wife, make up to his children what they had missed because of his crazy work schedule, and even perhaps begin to serve the Lord. But less than six months after retirement, in his early 60’s, he died of a massive heart attack. That story is repeated a thousand times a day.

We all know we can’t take it with us. But we must also come to grips with the fact that we can’t even control it after we’re gone. Jesus asked, “Who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” How many estates have fallen into the hands of hated enemies of the one who accumulated them? How many bequests have been squandered by an irresponsible child or dissipated by a disreputable trustee? Wealth hoarded is always left behind, and not always for the purposes we desire.

Now Jesus doesn't leave it up to us to decide what the point of this parable is. In verse 21 He provides His own application.

So what? (21)

“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” It is extremely important that we read that verse in its entirety. God does not call the person a fool who stores up things for himself. He calls the person a fool who stores up things for himself *but* is not rich toward God. There's nothing wrong with saving; there's nothing wrong with storing up for a rainy day. But there is something terribly wrong with hoarding while we ignore our obligations toward God.

In fact, we should not only be concerned about meeting our obligations to God; we should seek to be *rich* toward Him. What does that mean? I think it means investing for eternity—investing our time, our talents, our money, our hearts in worship and in serving people and in reaching them with the Good News that Jesus loves them enough to give His very life for them.

A couple of weeks ago I mentioned my visit to the Yanomao Indians, a stone age tribe in the jungles of southern Venezuela. The missionary lady I met there, Marg Jank, has been there nearly 45 years. She buried her husband there in the mid-80's. She has invested her entire life with these Indians, fighting a sometimes pitched battle against evil spirits, against unspeakable human cruelty, and against the godless influences of modern anthropologists, who have done everything in their power to get missionaries expelled so these “noble savages” can continue to follow their ancient pagan practices. Mrs. Jank brought them the love of Jesus, and where He has become Lord war has stopped, revenge killing and rape (once wholesale practices) have ceased, health and hygiene have improved, personal responsibility has been accepted, and people are at peace with God and themselves. Marg Jank is poverty stricken by the world's standards, but she is very rich toward God.

Of course, one doesn't have to become a missionary and go to the jungle to be rich toward God. It can happen when any one of us recognizes that our possessions are really God's, He has loaned them to us for a brief period, and He desires a good return on His investment.

Conclusion: I close with the story of Yussif, the Terrible Turk, the 350-pound wrestling champion in Europe several generations ago. After he won the championship in Europe he sailed to the United States to beat our champ, whose name was Strangler Lewis—a little guy who weighed just a shade over 200 pounds. Strangler had a simple plan for defeating his opponents. He'd put that massive arm of his around the neck of his opponent and he'd pump up his bicep and cut the oxygen off. Many an opponent had passed out in the ring when Strangler Lewis put the headlock on him.

The problem he had when it came to fighting the Turk was that the European giant didn't have a neck! He just went from his head to those massive shoulders. Lewis couldn't ever get the hold, so it wasn't long before Yussif threw Lewis on the mat and pinned him.

After winning the championship the Turk demanded all \$5,000 of his purse in gold. He put the championship belt around his vast middle, stuffed the gold into the belt, and boarded the next ship back to Europe. He was now the proud possessor of America's glory and its gold. He had won it all.

He set sail on the SS Bourgogne, but halfway across the Atlantic, it sank. Yussif went over the side with his gold still strapped around his body. The added weight was too much for the Turk, and he sank like an iron anvil before they could get to him with the lifeboats.

"What a fool!" you say. Sunk by his own gold. Yes, but how many of us are figuratively in the same boat as Yussif, with our things wrapped around us securely, ready to strangle the life out of us? You say, but this has nothing to do with me. I'm not wealthy and I don't have enough gold to sink a toy boat. Perhaps not, but the fact is, the words of this story are just as applicable to the envious people fighting their way up the ladder as they are to the top dogs that are trying to maintain their place in the penthouse of success. The issue is not one of possessions but of perspective.

May God help us to see once again this morning that while we cannot take it with us, if we invest it wisely, we can send it on ahead.

i. Chuck Swindoll, *The Lonely Whine of the Top Dog*, 20.