

Rich Towards God

Luke 12:13-21

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 7, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:13-21, NRSV)

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We have all seen it before. Maybe you’ve even been a part of it. A parent dies and leaves behind an inheritance and the surviving family members squabble over the estate, sometimes before the funeral is even over. Furniture, artwork, silverware, house, land, savings accounts, family heirlooms, dad’s old baseball card collection – we will fight over all of it. And there is certainly no shortage of opportunities to do so. It’s estimated that over the next 30 years more than \$30 trillion will be inherited in our country alone. And you know what they say, where there’s a will, there’s a family fighting over it.¹

Essentially that’s what is happening here. This man who approaches Jesus has lost his father and, according to Jewish law and custom, the inheritance, which was likely property, was left as a unit to his surviving sons. Now ideally, those sons would live in harmony together as they shared the inheritance. When Psalm 133:1 declares, “**How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!**”² this is what the

psalmist has in mind. Clearly such unity does not exist in this family and because this man is evidently the younger brother, he is subject to the authority of his older brother who is, you might say, the executor of the estate. Rabbis in those days often served as mediators and even, at times, offered legal ruling on such matters. It’s why this man brings his case to Jesus, saying, “**Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.**” He needs Jesus to help him get what he believes is his fair share.

Now, if his request sounds rude to you it’s because it is rude. He’s not asking, but telling Jesus what to do. Furthermore, he leaves no room for Jesus to hear the other side of the story from his older brother. All because, as we are about to learn, his greed has consumed him and made him feel he is entitled to what he believes is his. Theologian Lesslie Newbigin once said, “Our problem is that each of us overestimates what is due to him as compared with what is due to his neighbor.”³

In our translation Jesus calls this man “friend.” That’s not quite right. “Come on, man!” That’s a better translation. Jesus is not pleased with his request, mainly because Jesus is never pleased when people come to him in such a patronizing manner, only seeking from him the answer they want to hear rather than coming with ears to hear whatever answer Jesus is going to give them. Jesus isn’t here to placate our selfish desires, especially when our desires are to divide people. Christ came, after all, to reconcile and not to divide.

After rejecting the man’s request, Jesus then immediately turns from the man to address the crowd around him. This is a teachable moment for everybody within earshot. That includes us, by the way. That’s why Luke includes this account in the Gospel he writes to the church. Jesus speaks these words to anybody who could come after him. And essentially what he offers his followers here is a warning. It’s a serious warning. There is great danger that lies ahead.

“**Take care!**” he says to us, “**Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.**” Be on the defensive against greed because it’s coming after you in all sorts

¹ See

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kerrizane/2016/11/14/the-shocking-reason-why-siblings-squabble-over-inheritance-and-how-to-prevent-it/#283aca2764f6>

² NIV

³ Cited by Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans, 1980), 60.

of forms. It's insidious. It will sneak up on you. You have to watch out for it.

Here's the problem. Very few of us think we are greedy. Most of us don't even think there is a risk that we might become greedy. Sure, we all know greedy people, but not the people we see in the mirror. Jesus' warning here suggests we need to rethink things. Paul writes in I Timothy 6:10, **"For the love of money is the root of all evil."** All evil! You better believe that Jesus is giving this warning to every single one of us because the danger of greed is a real danger in the life of every person.

Why? Why is greed such a threat in our lives? I'll tell you why. Because the world is masterful at tricking us into thinking that one's life *does* consist in the abundance of possessions. In other words, the message we hear around us everywhere we turn is that your our lives are defined, at least to some extent, by what we possess.

According to an article in the New York Times, the average American is exposed to about 5,000 advertisements a day. 5,000! They are everywhere! "Supermarket eggs have been stamped with the names of CBS television shows. Subway turnstiles bear messages from Geico auto insurance. American Airlines is selling ads on motion sickness bags. And the trays used in airport security lines have been hawking Rolodexes."⁴ And one way or another every single one of these ads conveys essentially the same message, that your life will be substantively better if you own or consume this product. It is the relentlessness of this message, thousands of times day after day, that puts every last one of us in danger of embracing the idea that life, to at least some degree, does consist in the abundance of possessions. If that were true then greed would make perfect sense. But it's not true.

Here's the crazy thing. Evidence to the contrary is also all around us. Even secular sociologists have the data to prove that once a society's level of per capita wealth crosses a threshold from poverty to adequate subsistence, any further increases in national wealth have zero effect on happiness or contentment. In other words, if you don't have basic material wealth - a roof over your head, food to eat and clean water to drink, clothes on your back - it's hard to be happy. But once your basic material needs are met, additional wealth

will add nothing to the long term quality of your life.⁵ There are rich people who are happy, of course. But that happiness has nothing to do with their wealth. It's a sociological fact!

Phenomenally successful actor, Jim Carey, once said, "Everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever wanted so that they can see that it's not the answer."⁶ King Solomon, perhaps the most wealthy person in the history of the world, concluded, at the end of it all, that it **"all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."**⁷

I could go on and on with the evidence but it's probably not necessary because I think everyone in this room instinctively knows the truth, that a nicer car, bigger home, better wardrobe, fatter bank account, is not going to make you better off in the end. Designer Balraj Chana says, "After a few months of wealth you will eventually get used to it and become the same person that you are now." You know this is true. Right? You finally get some material thing you have long desired and the buzz lasts for a while but then just as quickly it goes away and you're on to pursuing the next acquisition.

So why do we keep chasing it? Because we are so easily deceived by the relentless and pervasive message that is telling us otherwise. It's why Jesus gives us such a fervent warning. The implication in his warning is that if this greedy brother actually gets what he wants, his share of his father's inheritance for himself, it will not solve anything in the end. In fact, it will probably make life worse for him because now some of his most important relationships, those with his own family, will be permanently severed.

So if it's not the abundance of possessions, what does your life consist of? That's the question here I want you to hold in your mind. What does your life consist of? What *should* it consist of? The answer, if you have ears to hear it, is in the parable Jesus tells us here. As we listen, our job, as it is with every parable Jesus tells us, is to find ourselves in the parable. That's the point. That's why Jesus tells it to us. So don't go looking for

⁵ See the studies outlined by Barry Schwartz in *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less* (Harper, 2004), 106.

⁶ Cited in a podcast from The Porch church in Dallas, Texas, "Life is Found in the Party", Danial Pokluda, September 25, 2018. Watch the whole message at <https://www.theporch.live/messages/5708>

⁷ Ecclesiastes 2:11, NRSV. Read this whole chapter for a clear denunciation of the life that wealth makes life better.

⁴ Louise Story, "Anywhere the Eye Can See, It's Likely an Ad", *New York Times* online, January 15, 2007. Read the full article at <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/15/business/media/15everywhere.html>

other people in this story. Look for yourself, and I'll look for myself. Okay?

“The land of a rich man produced abundantly.”

That's how the story begins. There is nothing underhanded happening here. This guy does not get his wealth through unjust or deceitful means. The sun, soil and rain have made this man rich. He's blessed. And that's a good thing. Material wealth is a good thing. The Bible never suggests otherwise. Every created thing is good. Money is not evil, but rather it's the unhealthy love of money that leads to evil. I would say, therefore, that God is pleased with everything that has happened in this story thus far. A man is blessed.

I think God is even pleased with the initial question the man asks, at least the first part. **“What should I do [now]?”** he asks. He has found himself in possession of more than he needs and so he's wondering what he should do. It's a very appropriate question, and one that most of us in this incredibly blessed part of the world ought to be asking regularly. A problem comes, however, with one word in the *second* part of the question. **“What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops.”** *His* crops? Who produced those crops? The text is clear. *The land* produced the crops. This material wealth, like all material wealth, is a gift from God and, in fact, still belongs to God, because all of creation ultimately belongs to God. Psalm 24:1 declares, **“The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”** The evidence for this, of course, is the fact that nobody ever in the history of the world gets to hold on to even a nickel when all is said and done. Even this man's life, as the parable makes clear at the end, will one day be demanded from him because it's not his.

But this farmer has missed it, like so many of others miss it. The word “my” appears five times in his very short speech. *My* crops. *My* barns. *My* grain. *My* goods. *My* soul. The pronoun “I” appears eight times in the original Greek text.⁸ It's all about him. Pitifully, he even asks his question to himself. It's almost as if his greed has bought him total isolation. There is nobody else he to whom he can ask this very important question. No family, no friends, no community, not even God. And when we are only asking questions of ourselves, we tend to create our own warped answers to those questions.

Case in point. **“I will do this,”** he answers himself. **“I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid**

up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

And I'm here to tell you, because I believe it's what Jesus is telling us in this story, it is very, very easy for any of us to reach this same conclusion.

Most every one of us in this room has had, and will continue to have, many opportunities to ask this question: What should I do with the abundance of possessions that have been placed in my hands? There are a few exceptions here, but most of us have in our possession today far more than we need. Is that fair? And again, all of that abundance is not contributing, in any significant way, to any sort of lasting or deeper satisfaction or contentment in life. Therefore, we must be regularly asking the same question this farmer asked but we *must* change our pronouns or we, too, will come to the same warped and, as we're about to see, dangerous conclusion he came to.

Here's the right way to ask the question. What should we do with the abundance of God's material wealth that he has entrusted for a time into our hands? See the difference? When we consider what we ought to give away, it's never a question of how much of my money should I give away to others, but a question of how much of God's money should I keep for myself. You see, when we start to frame the question this way, we are led to entirely different answers.

The Apostle Paul taught in his letters that there are two God-honoring reasons to work for money. The first was that we would not be a burden on others.⁹ The second was that we may have something to give to those in need.¹⁰ So first, it's good that we take a portion of what God entrusts to us to provide for the basic needs of ourselves and our families. And I don't think that just means that we have to live the lives of absolute minimalists. No, I think God does want us to enjoy things in life. But there is a point when we have enough, when more and more actually don't add to the quality of life, and at that point our abundance is to be given to others who don't even have their basic needs met and, as you know, there are billions of people in the world who are in that place.

You see the question we need to be asking? Lord, you have blessed me with more than I need. How much should I keep for myself and how much should I give away. And I have to say, I have been inspired by many examples in this congregation of people who take this question seriously. Some of you have truly inspired me because you really try to faithfully, humbly and generously handle the wealth God has entrusted to you. Maybe you can help the rest of learn to keep asking this

⁸ Leon Morris, *Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (InterVarsity Press, 1974), 230.

⁹ See I Thessalonians 2:7-12.

¹⁰ See Ephesians 4:28.

question and to keep asking it to God, always looking to him to show us how to manage what ultimately belongs to him in ways that honor him.

We must not come to the same conclusion that the man in the parable came to. If we do, the response we will receive from God is the same response he received from God: **“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”**

Maybe you’ve seen this cartoon. A man uses his wish from the magic lantern to ask for enough money to last the rest of his life. The wish is granted as the genie informs the man that he has one week to live. It’s all a matter of perspective, right? I Peter 1:24 declares, **“All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls.”** Your life on this earth, from the perspective of eternity, is a beautiful flower that, in short order, will fade away. In no time at all your life will be demanded of you as my life will be demanded of me. The Greek word here for ‘demanded’ was commonly used in those days to describe a loan that needed to be repaid. What we possess is not our own, even our lives.¹¹

If we, therefore, imagine that our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions, we have rooted our lives in something that is as temporary as a beautiful rose in your garden. Only a fool roots his or her life in something temporary. God alone is the only one who can fill that place in our lives, the only secure foundation and source of life. When we therefore trust in Christ alone above all things, we have trusted in a foundation that is secure. And as Jesus says later in this same chapter, **“Strive for God’s kingdom, and these things – all the material things of this world – will be given to you as well.”**¹²

I suspect we all have played the game Monopoly. I’m holding in my hand a crisp \$100 bill of Monopoly money. Impressive, right? I’m holding in my other hand a crisp \$100 bill of money minted by the United States government. Also impressive. So which one is more valuable? We’re quick to say it’s the green one, right? And that may very well be true. But if I’m playing the game of Monopoly, you could say that the monopoly money is actually more valuable because this \$100 is the accepted currency of the game and can therefore buy me a property or a hotel which can help me win the game. Remember, the objective of Monopoly, the way you win the game, is to accumulate

the most wealth. I used to get upset with my kind-hearted children when they were younger because they would let one another off from paying debts in the game. No! That’s not the point of the game. If you land on my hotel-lined Boardwalk property and the \$2,000 rent is going to bankrupt you, I’m going to bankrupt you!

Don’t let my competitiveness make you miss the point. Monopoly money is valuable while the game is being played because it helps you achieve the objective of the game. But once the game is over, all the money goes back into the box and, in that moment, ceases to have value. The game is over.

So what is the difference between monopoly money and what we call “real” money? Not as much as you might suspect. In a few years this money will also go back in the box. The moment I die every last nickel I possess will immediately become of no value to me because it will no longer be in my possession. It does have value to me now, however. But the rules of life are far different than the rules of Monopoly. Mainly, there is no value in me accumulating more and more wealth I don’t need in this life. The one with the most toys at the end does not win. That investment will not pay off. There is incredible value, however, even *eternal* value, if I take whatever material wealth is entrusted to me and invest some of it on myself and my family to meet our needs, but then invest the excess to care for others who do not have their needs met that the kingdom of God might be expanded.

It’s what Jesus refers to in the last verse of the passage. It’s a contrast of investment, storing up treasures for yourself, or becoming rich towards God. Which investment actually pays off? Jesus is clear; your life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions. Neither does mine.

Maybe it’s a coincidence, but I started preaching passage by passage through Luke’s Gospel back in January. This Sunday, the Sunday before Stewardship Commitment Sunday, the Sunday we traditionally are asked to consider what God is calling us to invest in the ministry of this congregation this coming year, on this Sunday this is the next text we come to in Luke. Maybe it’s a coincidence. Or maybe it’s a Spirit-led opportunity to immediately respond in faith to what Jesus is teaching us here.

I believe it’s the latter. This week is another opportunity in a long line of opportunities we will have to ask the very important question the fortunate farmer asks in this parable, but to ask it with the right pronouns in place. *What should we do with the abundance of God’s wealth which he has entrusted to us?* It has to go

¹¹ I’m reminded of Paul’s words in I Corinthians 6:19-20: **“You are not your own; you were bought at a price.”**

¹² Luke 12:31, NRSV

somewhere. In the parable the man decided to store it in bigger barns, but that wasn't his only option. The 4th century bishop, Ambrose, once suggested that there was plenty of storage space for these crops available in the mouths of the needy.

So there is work for us to do here, careful work. Most of us in this room have more than we need, a lot more than we need. So how much of what God has placed in our hands should we keep for ourselves. That's not a question I can answer for you, or you for me. In fact, the church gets into trouble when we start legalistically setting limits for one another, as if every follower of Jesus should live in this certain size house, drive only certain kinds of automobiles, have only so much saved up for retirement. No, each of us needs to work out that balance with God ourselves, seeking God's leading on what we keep and what we give. Again, it's all about making sure you use the right pronouns and direct the questions to the right person. If you buy a bigger house or nicer car, or put an unexpected bonus in the bank rather than the hands of those who have far less, you just need to make sure that's what God wants you to do with his money.

Having said that, I hope you realize that the wealthy person may not always be the one who has more but the one who needs less. Any person who has ever spent time with both the very poor and the very wealthy in this world has likely come away wondering why it is that many people with very little material wealth often have such joy while people with excessive amounts of wealth regularly have such misery.

As you reflect on these things this week, I am not ashamed to urge you to consider taking a generous portion of the abundance placed in your hands and give it generously to the ministry of this church. Many of you have been generous in this way already, and many of you will continue to be. And I say I'm unashamed to ask you this because I believe that God is at work in and through this congregation in eternally-impactful ways. I believe this to the extent that I, along with many others, have given my life to this work. One of the ways we are rich towards God is to be materially generous towards the work of God through his church, especially when the church is also seeking to be rich towards God as I believe is the case with this church.

If you have been a part of this congregation you are going to receive a pledge packet this week which includes an opportunity for your household – whether that is just you, or you and your spouse, or you and your kids – to take some time this week to reflect together on the questions raised here by Jesus' teaching *before* you decide what portion of abundance God is calling you to give. I'll be doing the same with my

family. I really encourage you to use the guide provided in the packet and take time to walk through the steps outlined there as a way to ask the question we have discovered today that God wants us to ask, right pronouns and all. And then make a pledge to give however the Lord leads you to give.

I've heard people say that we are to give until it hurts. I don't agree. That sets the bar too low. No, we are to give until it brings joy. You see, when we trust God and begin to give away things the world is telling us we need it may hurt at first. It *will* hurt at first. But in time we will discover that what we gave away was actually not needed. Then can you imagine the joy you discover when God sets you free from the idea that your life consists in the abundance of your possessions. Suddenly you are now free from the insatiable greed that endlessly consumes so many people. For if we learn to be rich towards God alone, a foundation which not even death can corrupt, we then can know joy regardless of the abundance in our lives, or lack thereof.¹³

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 12:13-21 again. What stands out to you from this passage?
2. Jesus warns us that **“one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”** What do you think this means? Do you agree?
3. Jesus describes the man in the parable as a fool. Why is he a fool?
4. Jesus ends the parable saying we are to be **“rich towards God.”** What do you think that means? How does a person become rich in this way?
5. Are you greedy? Is there a danger that you might become greedy?

¹³ I'm reminded of Paul's words in Philippians 4:12: **“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”**

6. How often do you seek God's will when you make financial decisions in life? Do you do so with only certain types of decisions?
7. How do you personally make decisions about what portion of God's wealth to keep for yourself and your family and what portion to give away?
8. It's been said before that the wealthy person may not be the one who has more but the one who needs less. Do you agree? Do you live your life as if this is true?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Is money a good thing or a bad thing? What does God wants us to do with our money?