

Greedy for God

Luke 12:13-21

August 5, 2007

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Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The text for today’s message is from the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of Luke:

And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear 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.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."¹

I’ll admit it... I have a problem... I like money.

I spend a large amount of my time making it, investing it, learning more about it, considering what to do with it. In my lesser moments I can even look to the security it might provide in times of drought, and the escape it offers when I need a break from my other duties in life.

¹ Luke 12:13-21 ESV

I know it is *dangerous*, I know it is *stupid*, and I know that it is ultimately *idolatrous*. And yet sometimes I can't seem to stop myself.

If I'm honest, I also have to acknowledge that this fixation is not rooted in need, as it is something that has existed in times that were lean and times that were plentiful.

I also know that I'm not alone in this obsession.

Many of us, regardless of our financial situation, like to store up treasures for ourselves, whether it is in a stock portfolio, a generous pension plan, or in the value of a cottage or other property. Some prefer their treasures in a more consumable form, and spend their wealth on upgrades to their homes and cars, or on silly luxuries. Then there are others who don't have as much, but who see the things they don't have and lust after them, trying to gain them through other means, be it by working a second job at the expense of family relationships, in spending any excess cash on trips to the casino, or by engaging in some questionable or downright criminal behavior in order to achieve the lifestyle they feel they are entitled to.

We have all heard the warnings of Scripture on the topic.

- “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil”²
- “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”³
- “you can not serve both God and Mammon”⁴
- “we’ve brought nothing into this world, we will take nothing out of it”⁵

And yet it seems a natural enough obsession. We need to eat so we work. We are told to do whatever we do with all our might, so we work hard and try to succeed in our endeavors. We know that we should have something to give to others, so we try to maximize our money so that we have some left over. We want to be sure that we aren’t a burden to others, so we save up for our retirement.

But somewhere in this seemingly natural course of events, the world, the devil, and our sinful nature tell us we need more, convince us that our efforts merit our riches, and tear us away from the One who is ultimately the source of all blessings, temporal and eternal.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus provides a parable in response to someone who was asking that He assist them in getting their supposed “fair share” of an inheritance. Brushing aside the request, He prefaces the parable by warning his

² 1 Timothy 6:10

³ Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25

⁴ Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13

⁵ 1 Timothy 6:7

listeners to guard against all kinds of greed, reminding them that their life is not about their possessions.

The parable itself is brief and simple. Man has much. Man gets more. Man comforts himself with his possessions. Man apparently forgets about God and his neighbor. Man dies suddenly and leaves his treasure behind, never receiving pleasure from it.

Now we have to be careful when hearing this parable not to make assumptions about the rich man that aren't mentioned in the text. There is no indication that the man received his wealth dishonestly; he simply had an exceptional crop. We don't know how old the man was; just that he believed he had enough set aside for many years. We are not too assume that storing and saving wealth (in this case in the form of grain), is bad in and of itself; after all that is what Joseph did in Egypt in preparation for the famine, and his planning was a blessing not only to Egypt but to the whole world when they were starving.⁶

Though the man states that he wishes to relax, eat, drink and be merry, there is no indication that, like the prodigal son, he was to squander his cash on prostitutes and wild living; just that he was assuming that he could derive security from and have enjoyment of the good things that he possessed for a long time to

⁶ Genesis 41

come. And though the man's death was imminent, there is no specific indication that his death, (the death which comes to us all), was a direct and immediate judgment by God about his particular conduct or the self-absorbed thoughts about his possessions, just that he was about to die and didn't know that all of his selfish, short-sighted plans would never come to fruition.

Indeed the parable does not indicate that the man was particularly depraved in comparison to others (at least not in the way we normally consider depravity), just that he was incredibly stupid in his attitude towards the goods he had been blessed with. "Fool" is how God addresses him.

At a superficial level, the rich fool is not much different than a lottery winner, who loses all her friends and finds herself alone and miserable after her "victory", or a recently drafted sports star who dies in a freak accident after signing a multi-million dollar contract, or the hard-working "regular Joe" who is diagnosed with a terminal illness just weeks after celebrating his retirement. But Jesus doesn't tell this parable just to spread some gossip about someone having bad luck and missing out on some great material blessing.

No, the purpose of the parable is to warn us all against greed, by demonstrating that even if we receive that which we covet, it won't provide us with the satisfaction or the security that we hope it will.

The sudden death of the rich man jolts us into understanding clearly and directly that his wealth wasn't as valuable as he seemed to think it was.

However, even if the rich man would have had "many years" to enjoy his wealth (and many such men do), he would still have lived and died a poor, pitiable fool whose work and wealth would have been meaningless.

As we read in today's lesson from Ecclesiastes:

"Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.⁷

And from a few chapters later, we see a further parallel to Jesus' warning about covetousness being at the root of the problem:

Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.⁸

So our desire for excess isn't just pointless in the long run, it is a symptom of our current sinful need to have more and be more than our neighbors.

In closing the parable, Jesus derives the moral of the story by stating "so is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God".⁹

⁷ Ecclesiastes 2:18-19 NASB

⁸ Ecclesiastes 4:4 ESV

⁹ Luke 13:21 ESV

Suddenly, the rich man's foolishness is seen not merely as the mistake of trusting in things that will be of no use when we die, but as the mistake of placing anything ahead of our relationship with God.

This is not an equation describing an inverse relationship, as if a man who is poor will necessarily be rich toward God, or that a man who is rich necessarily has to be poor toward God. It is simply describing what happens when one makes a god of his money, and neither acknowledges the true God who gives that temporal blessing, nor the eternal blessings which are of far greater value.

And yet we must confess that there is a recurring theme in Scripture about the special danger we face when we have more than we need.

Luther wrote about money:

"Wealth is the most insignificant thing on earth, the smallest gift that God can give a man. What is it in comparison to the Word of God? Indeed, what is it even in comparison to the gifts of the body, such as beauty? ... And yet people rush after it so madly. It is the material, formal, efficient, and final motive of men; and yet there is nothing good in it. This is why God usually gives riches to coarse fools whom He grants nothing besides."¹⁰

I don't think I'll pass along this quote to my bosses at RIM¹¹. Hopefully none of my friends and family will ever feel the need to quote this back to me.

¹⁰ Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1435 (4618)

¹¹ Jim Balsillie and Mike Lazaridis, Co-CEO's of Research in Motion (RIM), where I spent over a decade

Before we go any further, we must deal with something unpleasant. Understand that some of those listening now may be thinking, “Boy, I guess those rich people need to be on guard against greed, good thing I’m not rich”. Please realize that today this text is being preached to hundreds of millions of Christians all over the world. Who do you think those listeners, from Thailand to Haiti, from Nigeria to Nicaragua, some of whom truly are concerned about where their daily bread will be coming from, will be thinking of when they hear about the rich fool?

Will they be thinking about the couple who are working with their financial advisor to determine if they can retire early, and still afford to spend their winters down south? Will they be thinking about the family complaining about gas prices as they fill up their SUV on the way home from the cottage? Perhaps about the daughter who swears her life will be incomplete unless Daddy breaks down and buys her an iPhone? Or will they be thinking about the stingy senior who has the benefit of government pensions and health care coverage, and who yet has decided to spend the rest of his days on his couch watching TV or focused on his hobbies, enjoying the security of his new lifestyle rather than using his time and freedom to give back to his community?

Will those Christians be thinking about you and me?

Even the poorest among us live a lifestyle that many of our brothers around the world would marvel at. Hence, we must all be on guard against all kinds of covetousness.

If we knew of someone who had more than they needed, but then spent all of their money throwing one big, extravagant party for themselves, ensuring they would spend the rest of their lives in extreme poverty, would we not think they were rather foolish? Why would they throw away their future years, possibly dozens of them, just so they could be a glutton for one night. Could that one night's pleasure make up for what they would ultimately suffer?

How much more foolish is it when in choosing between our material wealth gained in the world, and our spiritual wealth gained through Jesus, we actually choose our temporal life, which is but a breath, and throw away our eternity.

Luther states:

“Our Lord God does not bestow more [wealth] on one than on another only to have us misuse it for purposes of arrogance and luxury but to have us more willingly help others, who need it, and to save for them and for us.”¹²

Clearly then, while our wealth in the West should be acknowledged as a blessing from God, it is not for us to hijack it for our own purposes, but to be used for His.

¹² Plass, 1436 (4621)

Luther likens the granting of wealth by God to a test when he writes:

“For God does not bestow riches on you that you may draw the conclusion that He is gracious. He has given you a different, greater blessing from which you may correctly draw that conclusion. He wants to test you to see whether you will remain in His fear, will humble yourself before Him, and render Him due obedience. For very few people do this; they get insolent when good fortune comes to them. [...] For unless souls are illumined and ruled by the Holy Spirit, like the souls of David, Abraham, and others, it is impossible for them not to be upset by good fortune, as has been well said: *Fortune turns those whom it favors into fools*. This is why the psalm gives the admonition: “If riches increase, set not your heart upon them” (Ps 62:10)”¹³

Obviously the rich fool in the parable failed the test that God was giving him.

As to what the proper relationship to our temporal wealth is, Luther states:

“The temporal goods you have, God has given to you for this life.... But you should not fasten or hang your heart on them as though you were going to live forever. You should always go on and consider *another, higher, and better* treasure, which is your own and which will last forever.”¹⁴

Bible Commentator Matthew Henry summed up the challenges that riches pose to the soul by saying:

“There is a *burden of care* in getting riches, *fear* in keeping them, *temptation* in using them, *guilt* in abusing them, *sorrow* in losing them, and a *burden of account* at last to be given concerning them.”¹⁵

Wealth, like any other good gift, can be dangerous when we lose sight of the eternal God who gave it in the first place.

¹³ Plass, 1436 (4620)

¹⁴ Plass, 1340 (4307)

¹⁵ Matthew Henry - Commentary on Genesis 13:1-4

No wonder we read in the book of Proverbs, the plea:

“Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much [...] and say, “Who is the LORD?””¹⁶

If seeking and trusting in worldly wealth is so dangerous, what is this richness toward God that we are to be placing ahead of it?

As Georg Pfefferkorn writes in the hymn, “What is the World to Me”

“The world seeks after wealth and all that mammon offers, Yet never is content Though gold should fill its coffers, I have a higher good, content with it I’ll be, My Jesus is my wealth, What is the world to me!”¹⁷

Being rich toward God involves knowing Him through His Son Jesus. It does not require a lifetime of toil to earn those riches, for they are given to us freely. And when we die, we don’t need to worry about having sought them for nothing.

As Paul wrote to Timothy:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.¹⁸

To the Colossians he wrote:

My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.¹⁹

¹⁶ Proverbs 30:9

¹⁷ Lutheran Service Book (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006) 730

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 6:17-19

¹⁹ Colossians 2:2-3

And to the Ephesians he says:

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.²⁰

God indeed richly provides us with everything, from our daily bread, to a Savior whose blood washes away our sins, including those we commit when dealing with our possessions.

As Paul states so beautifully:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.²¹

To neglect this great wealth, which we neither earned nor deserve, and dedicate our lives merely to accumulating and being satisfied by worldly riches, rather than to seek and enjoy the blessings of God which last not just for “many years”, but forever, would make us fools indeed.

Whatever our station in life may currently be, let us be perpetually on guard against coveting a wealth that perishes, and instead be greedy for God, always thanking and praising Him for the eternal treasure he has given us freely through our Lord Jesus. Amen.

²⁰ Ephesians 2:6-7

²¹ 2 Corinthians 8:9 ESV