

## **A Big Surprise** Luke 12:13-21

The editor of a small weekly newspaper, annoyed at legislation that had recently been passed, ran a scathing editorial under the headline:

**HALF OF OUR LEGISLATORS ARE GREEDY CROOKS!**

Prominent local politicians were outraged. Tremendous pressure was exerted to retract the statement. He finally succumbed to the pressure and ran an apology with the headline:

**HALF OF OUR LEGISLATORS ARE NOT GREEDY CROOKS!**

When we think of greed, we tend to think of a vice that plagues politicians, doctors, lawyers, oilmen, corporate moguls and labor unions. But, greed comes in many forms, and Jesus warned his audience about "all kinds of greed." One day, we will each face God to give an account of our life. To what degree has your life simply been a time to amass more wealth, pleasure, comfort, power or status? Or, to what degree have you consciously lived your life with a sense of God's watchful eye? Not everyone is rich, but everyone has occasions to be generous. We are all included in Paul's words:

<sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. <sup>19</sup>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. – 1 Timothy 6:17-19

"The life that is truly life" is God's gift of eternal life. Jesus teaches us to embrace that life now by faith. Faith is never merely intellectual or emotional. Biblical faith always shapes the will. Because faith already sees that life to come, it invests in it now. This is what the *Rich Fool* failed to do. He thought he was set up for life but he was in for a big surprise, one which we don't want to encounter.

### **I. An Admonition against All Kinds of Greed (13-15)**

<sup>13</sup>Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

<sup>14</sup>Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" <sup>15</sup>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."

Jesus' parable is prefaced by the words: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed ..." Is not greed simply greed? In the sense that Jesus condemns it, the answer is clearly "Yes." However, we don't always recognize greed in ourselves. Again, we may think of greed as mainly flourishing among the rich and powerful. The main character in the story is rich and powerful, but don't miss the import of the phrase, "all kinds of greed." Jesus' teachings tend to speak to us all one way or another.

#### **A. There Is a Greed that Never Has Enough**

The word "greed" typically prompts thoughts of a chronic appetite for more that is never satisfied. This is an accurate description of one kind of greed. Solomon wrote about such insatiable lust:

<sup>10</sup>Whoever loves money never has money enough;  
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.  
This too is meaningless. – Ecclesiastes 5:10

Someone observed that a man with six children is more easily satisfied than a man with six million dollars, because the man with six million dollars wants more. The voracious lust for “more” when one already has “much” is a sin. Such greed betrays of spirit of discontent and ingratitude and it is certainly covered under Jesus’ blanket statement, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.” But, the greed of the man who never has enough to be content is not specifically the kind of greed that is featured in Jesus’ parable and it is not the kind of greed that serves as the backdrop for the parable.

## **B. There Is a Greed Born of Jealousy**

Millard Fuller of Habitat for Humanity once asked an assembly of 200 pastors a seemingly innocent question: “Is it possible for a person to build a house so large that it’s sinful in the eyes of God? Raise your hand if you think so.” All 200 pastors raised their hands.

“Okay,” said Fuller, “then can you tell me at exactly what size, the precise square footage, a certain house becomes sinful to occupy?”

Silence followed. You could have heard a pin drop. Finally, a small, quiet voice spoke up from the back of the room: “When it is bigger than mine.”

This is the strain of greed that prompted Jesus’ *Parable of the Rich Fool*. Rabbis were often approached to settle disputes. Here, a malcontent brother approached Jesus because he was unhappy with his share of an inheritance. Jesus refused to play along. It was not that He was unconcerned with fair play. He was deeply concerned with such things, but a few clues reveal this man to be nothing more than a greedy whiner, and Jesus had no desire to play referee between a whiner and his brother.

This man’s horrendous timing exposed a covetous and somewhat twisted character. Jesus had been speaking to many weighty issues; hypocrisy, reverence, God’s concern for the details of our existence and provision, not to mention the Holy Spirit assisting us when we are in hot water. Through all of this, one self-absorbed goof could not wait to ask Jesus to side with him in a selfish squabble.

Had Jesus rendered a verdict, it would have been an easy one. He always upheld the Law of Moses, and Moses was clear regarding such matters of inheritance. *Deuteronomy 21* taught that a first-born son was to receive a double share of the father’s wealth. This man was attempting to use Jesus to manipulate his brother into giving him something to which he was not entitled. Today, we might be tempted to whine, “Not fair” along with this brother, but God’s Law had already settled the matter.

The greed that prompted Jesus to respond with a warning against “all kinds of greed” was not the voracious lust for more that we tend to equate with greed. It was the covetous greed of jealousy. And, the parable that Jesus would recount actually would utilize still another specific kind of greed.

## **C. There Is a Greed for that “One Big Score”**

If the fool Jesus features in His parable had a jealous streak, Jesus does not mention it. Clearly, he did not suffer from that greed that never has enough, because once his bumper crop was harvested, the man was ready to retire. With a couple of bigger barns, he envisioned himself set up for years. This was not a man who could never be satisfied. On the contrary, this was man that had arrived at his point of satisfaction. He was content to “Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry” until his days ran out.

This parable might have something to say to a man who looks forward to a retirement of utter ease and play and recreation rather than one that simply compensates for the decreased productivity of old age. It might have something to say to the person who gambles too much or puts too much of the family grocery money into lottery tickets. It clearly has something to say to anyone who thinks that there is a point of financial security out there that renders him utterly independent, for he is never independent of God and he is never independent of the responsibility to others that comes with God's generosity to Him.

Jesus warned against "all kinds of greed..." Greed is not only the insatiable appetites of the filthy rich, for Jesus was responding to a man with a jealous greed with a story about a man with a miserly greed. Apparently, to Jesus, greed is greed - whether it is insatiable, miserly, stingy, jealous or superstitious. Greed is trusting stuff more than one trusts God. It is blind to the provisions and the will of God.

## **II. An Anecdote about a Rich Fool (16-20)**

<sup>16</sup>And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. <sup>17</sup>He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

<sup>18</sup>"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. <sup>19</sup>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."'

<sup>20</sup>"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?'

### **A. What Made this Man a Fool?**

In the Bible, the term "fool" has nothing to do with intellect or "smarts". This rich man could probably not be too dumb and remain rich. The word in verse 20 literally means "without reason." It is defined by G. Vos as "the lack of commonsense perception of the reality of things natural and spiritual ... or the imprudent ordering of one's life in regard to salvation." A "fool" lives without giving thought to God. This aptly describes the main character in Jesus' parable.

### **B. This Fool Was Blind to the Source of His Blessings**

After his land produced a bumper crop, the rich man's first thought was, "What shall I do?" The Law had already placed demands on the first tenth. Beyond that, he might have acknowledged the Lord of the Harvest with some expression of thanksgiving. A particularly grateful man desiring to give glory to God might have called together family and friends for a celebration, one of those extravagant affairs upon which frugal folk frown. When Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, poured a pint of pure nard worth a year's wage over the feet of Jesus, Judas criticized her for wastefulness. Now, nobody expected this guy to squander his entire windfall, but pinching pennies also seems a bit inappropriate, especially, if he recognized God as His Provider, which apparently, He did not.

### **C. This Fool Was Blind to the Responsibilities that Accompanied His Blessings**

Christians are duty-bound to meet the needs of hurting people, but we have found many ways to dismiss ourselves from such concerns; "I pay taxes that go to public assistance." "Some people abuse the system and don't want to help themselves." The more jaded we become, the more tightfisted we become and the less prone we are to want to be blessings to others.

In the early church, "No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had" (Acts 4:32). This attitude of non-ownership fostered rampant generosity:

... <sup>34</sup>There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup>and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. - Acts 4:34, 35

Some people have mistaken this Acts 4 community with a kind of socialism, but socialism is an attempt to coerce the public ownership of everything. Acts 4 had nothing to do with public ownership, state-imposed or otherwise. Acts 4 tells of a spirit-taught perspective of "God-ownership" that never looks away from people in need. Self-reliance, private-ownership and individual responsibility are good western values, but we must not become so obsessed with these values that we become blind toward those who hurt. If we do, we will be the ones headed for the big surprise.

"I have no place to store my crops," the rich man thought as he opted to upgrade his barns. What a bizarre response. One fourth-century preacher responds to the *Rich Fool* as follows:

"You have barns - the bosoms of the needy, - the houses of the widows, - the mouths of orphans and of infants." - Ambrose of Milan

#### **D. This Fool Was Blind to the Impermanence of His Blessings**

It has been said that a miser is no fun to live with, but he makes a great ancestor. Even misers "can't take it with them." After all that hard work invested in getting rich and staying rich, they too must leave it all behind - to trust managers, to the government or to heirs who may or may not prove to be imbeciles. One rich man thought he was set for life, 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."

We each live out our days under the watchful eye of God. That reality alone should define for us what is "wise" and what is "foolish". The most important thing to a fool is to make it big in the here and now. The most important thing to a wise man is to please God with his life. The wisest occupation of our limited days on earth is to lay up treasure in heaven through deeds of mercy and loving kindness, so that we will one day be found rich in the eyes of the only One Who matters.

### **III. An Amplification of the Basic Thrust of the Story (21, 22ff)**

<sup>21</sup>"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

#### **A. Jesus Was Addressing neither Wealth nor Poverty, but the Blindness of Greed**

Jesus was neither condemning "the haves" nor endorsing the "have nots". He wanted nothing to do with commanding one brother to share with another. Coerced sharing only fosters resentment on the part of providers and irresponsibility on the part of recipients. I don't have to defend that statement. Just look at both sides of the modern welfare state. Resentment and irresponsibility abound.

Jesus came to transform our hearts. His divine love of justice and mercy awakened in us must always express itself in generosity. Jesus came to teach us how to live now in the presence of God and in anticipation of eternity. Worrying more about "the now" than tending to "the not yet" is foolishness.

## **B. Be Rich toward God! Seek the Kingdom! verses 22ff**

This story about avoiding all kinds of greed is linked to other lessons about trusting God in all things:

<sup>22</sup>Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. <sup>23</sup>Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. <sup>24</sup>Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! - Luke 12:22-24

Read the rest of that section on your own. You will find a beautiful series of promises about God's provision for you as you seek to secure "treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted" (verse 32). Read it because Jesus tied it to this parable of a *Rich Fool*. The parable is not about economic equality. It is about remembering that God pays attention to us. A key verse in the section that follows is verse 31: "But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." God provides for those who tend to His business and He mocks those who act as if He is not there.

You can always seek God's kingdom. You can watch your life. You can guard your tongue. You can minister to the poor. You can be a kind and generous servant to all. You can be Christ's witness. Policies at the plant, office, warehouse or wherever may forbid you to discuss matters of faith, but no policy can effectively veil a life conspicuously lived before the presence of God.

In the days of Elisha, the army of Aram laid siege and cut off supplies to Samaria, the capital city of Israel after the kingdom had divided. The lack of food within the city walls was critical. The king of Israel encountered one troubled woman who was grieving because she had been double-crossed. She and another woman had agreed to kill and cook their sons for food. She had surrendered her own son, but the other woman had hidden hers. Suffice it to say, the situation in Samaria was bleak.

Four lepers resided near the city gate. If they stayed there, famine would kill them. If they entered the city, food was even scarcer. They decided to take their chances and surrender to the Arameans. The enemy might kill them, but maybe not. However, when they arrived at the camp, it was deserted. God had caused the Arameans to hear chariots. They thought Israel's king had hired the Hittites and Egyptians so they fled, leaving all their supplies. The lepers ate their fill and carried away vast quantities of gold and silver, but when they returned for more, they were stricken by conscience:

... "We're not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace." - II Kings 7:9

Had such awareness occurred to the *Rich Fool*, his would have been a very different parable.

God blesses who He blesses. It is the role neither of religious hierarchies nor of the state to coerce equal distribution of wealth throughout the populous. But, where God's kingdom rules the hearts of men, the needs of others cannot simply be ignored. We are blessed so that we can bless others and not simply to count our money. Any man attentive to God's gaze knows that he "is not doing right" when he is selfish or miserly with the blessings he has received from the hand of a generous God.