

Foolish Farmer • Luke 12:13–21

Luke 12 begins with thousands of people listening as Jesus taught profound spiritual truths:

In the meantime, when so many thousands of the multitude had gathered together that they trod upon one another, he began to say to his disciples first, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you have more value than many sparrows.

And I tell you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.

And every one who speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. (Luke 12:1-12)

As Jesus was teaching some of the most profound truths that are written in all of scripture, a man out of the crowd — a complete stranger — interrupted him and completely changing the subject, said to him, “Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.” People must have been shocked that someone would interrupt the master with such a mundane thing — his inheritance. Jesus was talking about heaven and hell, the unpardon-

able sin and about what the Holy Spirit does in the life of a disciple and this guy says, “Jesus, would you fix it so that I get my share of the will?”

We’re much the same; at least I know I am. There are times when we are reading the amazing revelations of God in scripture and our minds wander. We’re thinking about the unpaid bills. When the preacher is striving to explain God’s great spiritual proclamations we think if we could really get a word from God it certainly would be fascinating to find out what the economy is going to do and whether the interest rates are going to go up or down. At those times when God is reaching out to touch us with his personal word we fail to listen and instead we pray and ask God to help us ask the boss for a raise when we meet him next Tuesday. I don’t mean to communicate that any of these are invalid concerns, but we are doing what this stranger did to Jesus.

This unnamed man from the multitude was not unusual in his petition. In the first century in Palestine it was very common for people to go to rabbi and to ask them to resolve legal difficulties and Jesus was a rabbi or teacher. However, it’s interesting that this fellow who interrupted Jesus was not asking

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him to judge all the facts and give a fair verdict, but instead he asked Jesus to agree with his own desire: “Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.”

Jesus responded rather harshly in verse 14: “Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?” It was anything but a warm and friendly greeting. Jesus was saying, “Do you understand what I’m doing here? I’m not here to divide up inheritances. I have come here to address the major issues of sin and righteousness, heaven and hell and not minor issues of the law.”

I think that there is a message here for our generation. Often when we come to Jesus we are not so much interested in the spiritual priorities that interest him as we are in asking him to resolve our family squabbles. Or we come to him as an attorney from whom we seek a legal opinion. Or we seek his

advice on how we ought spend our money or pay our bills. Not that those things aren't important, but we need to understand that Jesus is primarily concerned about our eternal destiny and our personal relationship with God.

What Jesus said next in Luke 12:15 is most important. To my thinking it is a verse worth memorizing. It is the very core of what this passage of scripture is all about:

*Take heed. Beware of all
covetousness. For a man's life does
not consist in the abundance of his
possessions.*

In this single sentence Jesus summarized what ought to be our attitude toward material possessions in general and money in particular. This verse pointedly preaches against the so called "prosperity theology" that has become popular among some Christians.

Whatever else is on your mind at this moment, give sufficient attention to Jesus' words when he says, "Take heed. Beware of all covetousness. For a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." That's a big message from the mouth of the master. He wants it clearly understood so he illustrates with a three-point parable.

Point number one is success. Luke 12:16 tells us, "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully." This parable is the story of a man who had it made! He was very rich and successful. If he lived today he would be a prime candidate to be on the cover of Money magazine because he was that successful and that prosperous. He was the kind of man that I think most of us admire and maybe even envy. If we had the opportunity to have lunch together we would ask him, "What is the key to your success? Why do you become richer and richer when so many other people are poor?"

He's like the guy that's already loaded and then wins the lottery. Or the person who seems to have plenty of money already and then gets a major inheritance or a stock market killing or a big bonus.

We've all fantasized about winning a million dollars tax free, receiving an unexpected inheritance or winning a lawsuit. We'd love to experience such success. Yet seldom do we think about the downside. Are the happiest people you know also the richest people you know? Seldom, when we

imagine that type of success for ourselves or for anyone else, do we think about how riches often lead, not to contentment, but to tragedy.

When we read Jesus' words in Mark 10:25, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven," we often spend more energy explaining the meaning of the "eye of the needle" as a gate in the city of Jerusalem, than considering the warning of the danger of riches.

I'll be up front with you. I read what the Bible says about success and wealth and money. I know the warnings. I read them and I preach them. And yet, I would like to have a few million. If this next week I find out that someone has left me a significant amount of money, in all probability I will cash the check.

Except compared to the farmer in the parable I already am rich. I live in a house that he probably never could have dreamed of. I have a car, a boat, lots of books and several TVs. So what I am really admitting to you is not that I would like to be rich but that I would like to be richer. Success.

And so Jesus says to me, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." The Greek word that's translated as "beware" literally means "to take positive action to ward off a foe." So the idea is that you're being attacked and you've got to immediately do something significant to fight against the tremendous foe that's out to get you. Jesus is saying to me and to you, "Watch out for the stuff called success. Watch out for it and take positive action to ward off the dangers because success and riches and particularly the desire for more riches can be your greatest enemy."

The second point in Jesus' parable is about self. Listen to the thoughts of the farmer in verses seventeen to nineteen:

*And he thought to himself, "What shall I do, for I have no where to store my crops?"
And 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. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.'"*

There are a lot of very positive things that here can be said about this farmer. He was a good business manager. He used his resources well. He was a

man of vision, decision and the kind of guy who planned ahead. He looked to the future and made provision for possible lean years ahead. In one sense he was very consistent with what Jesus taught elsewhere in other parables about money. He didn't hoard his money like Uncle Scrooge but used it for ease, food and pleasure. He took what he had and did something with it.

So why did he get in so much trouble? The problem here is "self." He was completely selfish. Listen again to verses 17 to 19 and particularly to the personal pronouns "I" and "my":

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This man did not consider himself a steward of what God had lent to him. He really believed that everything that he had was his. But there's more to it than that. This guy thought that his security for the future was in his possessions. John Calvin, the great reformation leader, wrote a fascinating comment on this man: "He lengthened out his expectation of life, in proportion to his great riches." He was a fool! He figured the more money he had the longer he would live.

He wasn't alone, for this is a timeless phenomenon. Who do you think is really more prone to trust God, the rich man or the poor man? When you reflect back on your own experience as I often have, is it not adversity that tends to draw us to God far more than prosperity? There may be some exceptions, but don't write your rule by the exception. It is most often the tough experiences of life that cause us to come close to the Lord and it is the prosperous experiences of life that tend to cause us to trust in ourselves.

When we pray for our daily bread in the Lord's Prayer, in all probability it is nothing more than a ritual because we have plenty of bread and food. We come from homes where the refrigerator is full. When we have money in our pocketbooks we don't particularly trust God for "daily bread." When we live in comfortable homes we're not likely to pray

for a place to sleep. Only if that comfortable home is lost do we then in that adversity turn to God and depend upon him. When we have comprehensive health insurance we don't worry about paying our medical bills. It is what we don't have that tends to draw us closest to God.

Try to follow the points being made in this parable. It is success to self. It's a good feeling to be successful. And it's a good feeling to be self-reliant. We tend to want more and more of the money which makes us more and more successful so we can depend more and more upon ourselves.

There's an old Roman proverb that says that money is like seawater. The more a man drinks the thirstier he becomes. I saw part of a TV quiz program where the contestants were asked, "What percent of women who are millionaires would give up their money to become the most beautiful woman in the world?" The answer was nine percent. Now I would have guessed far more but then I wouldn't give up anything to become the most beautiful woman in the world so maybe I'm not a good judge of that. Ninety-one percent found too much security in possessions to give them up for anything.

Does all this mean that money is bad? No — but dangerous. Jesus warns us, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Which brings us to Jesus' third point in this parable: success, self and soul. He says in verse 20 to the foolish farmer, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

The farmer was so sure he was secure. He thought he had everything under control. But he didn't. God is the ultimate decider of the ultimate issue: death. The farmer indeed was a fool. He had made a success of everything except what really mattered most.

He was so foolish — yet such a common foolishness. Our society screams the importance of success and self. Pick up today's newspaper or turn to any station on the television and you can't escape the message that success, money and possessions bring power and make life good. But it's wrong. I think it's tough to imagine that anything that we hear that frequently is really all that wrong.

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This past week our family was driving along in the car and the topic of conversation was how George Washington died. (I have no idea how that topic came up!) Not having my encyclopedia right there in the car I had to depend upon memory and I said that I think, if I recall correctly, that George Washington died from blood-letting. They made an incision to let out a significant quantity of blood to get rid of the “bad blood” they believed was making him sick. In terms of today’s medicine that is really absurd, but it was common medical practice at that time. It was what everybody believed was the right thing to do.

Our society says that the more you have the better you are. That’s what life is all about — possessions. It’s pretty tough to disagree when that message is everywhere. But then in verse 21 Jesus tells us the real truth: “So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” He’s a fool if he is not rich toward God. The other alternative is to be rich toward God. J. B. Phillip paraphrases this verse as “rich where God is concerned.”

This is not suggesting that you have a bank account of good works in heaven and God keeps some sort of celestial computer record. It is talking about where we put our trust and our confidence. When our trust and our confidence is in God and not in money or possessions then we are rich toward him. And only then do we really see possessions as a means and not an end. They are to be used primarily for God’s glory rather than for our glory.

The practical test for this is to imagine losing all of one’s possessions. Ask yourself, “What if I lost everything?” I mean everything that you count to be of value. What would that do to you? Would it ruin your life? Would it be such a disaster that you can’t imagine how you could go on? That’s an indication that you have the wrong priorities. But, on the other hand, if your response would be, “Losing everything would be a terrible inconvenience and not the way I would ever choose it to be, but I still have my Lord and I still trust God even if everything else is gone,” then you are “rich toward God.” Your priorities are right.

William Barclay, the talented Scottish writer, tells the story about a conversation between an ambitious young man and an older wiser friend.

Young man: “I will learn my trade.”

Older man: “And then?”

Young man: “I will set up my business.”

Older man: “And then?”

Young man: “I will make my fortune.”

Older man: “And then?”

Young man: “Well I suppose that I will grow old and retire and enjoy my money.”

Older man: “And then?”

Young man: “Well I suppose that some day I’ll die.”

Older man: “And then?”

My friend, what about you? What are you really living for? Jesus said, “Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

I invite you to bow your head with me. Let’s talk to God about our priorities. Is Jesus number one or are our possessions number one? Would you resolve with me to renounce success and self as your priority and claim Jesus and riches towards God as your new priority?

Our Father, we are not a great deal unlike that man who interrupted Jesus with a concern of lesser things. His attention was elsewhere as ours is often prone to be. But, Lord, let us not lose the truth that you have communicated to us. May we take to heart the words of Jesus to “take heed and beware of all covetousness” and may we be rich toward you for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

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