

Stories with Intent

THE PARABLES OF JESUS



The Rich Fool

The fact of the matter is, no one is untouched by concerns about money – do we have enough, too much, how does it relate to our faith, how do we teach our children values about wealth – and our culture offers woefully inadequate advice to address our concerns.

In the Gospels, however, Jesus talks openly about money and possessions. He challenges listeners with imperatives that invite them into freedom from fear and bondage. Jesus commands us to put God and his kingdom first, to give generously, and to manage our resources responsibly. It is not easy to be faithful stewards in a world stricken with need, but as we grow in obedience in the service of all, we participate in kingdom work that is so deeply needed.

Parables that focus on wealth all appear in Luke's Gospel. These parables reflect a central theme in Luke and in Jesus' preaching: the problem of wealth in the context of the kingdom where closeness to God is life and attachment to things reflects soul-stifling anxiety and fear. These parables are parables of discipleship, but more narrowly focused, for a primary question regarding discipleship is what one does with money.

Luke, of course, also has a major concern for how wealth and resources are used. Almost every chapter of both his Gospel and Acts has some reference to money and material resources. His concerns for the poor, denunciations of the rich, and discussions of attitudes toward wealth and its use repeatedly emphasize that discipleship in the kingdom of God requires a major redirection of how one thinks about and uses material possessions. This is not surprising since use of possessions is a revelation of one's true self.

Our primary focus this week is on the parable of **The Rich Fool** (*other parables that focus on wealth include The Rich Man and Lazarus in 16:19-31 and The Unjust Steward in 16:1-13*). Elisabeth Johnson writes, "Many who hear this parable, especially in a North American context, may wonder: Why is the rich farmer called a fool? One could easily argue that the rich man is a wise and responsible person. He has a thriving farming business. His land has produced so abundantly that he does not have enough storage space in his barns. So he plans to pull down his barns and build bigger ones to store all his grain and goods. Then he will have ample savings set aside for the future and will be all set to enjoy his golden years."

Isn't this what we are encouraged to strive for? Isn't it wise and responsible to save for the future? The rich farmer would probably be a good financial advisor. He seems to have things figured out. He has worked hard and saved wisely. Now he can sit back, relax, and enjoy the fruits of his labor, right?

Not exactly. There is one very important thing the rich man has not planned for — his reckoning with God. But 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?" (Luke 12:20)."

The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21; 22-34)¹

Background:

- **Settling Disputes:** In 12:13-14 Jesus is asked to settle a dispute. Since disputes were often over how the Hebrew Scriptures should be interpreted, rabbis and other respected teachers were asked to adjudicate.
- **Inheritance:** Inheritance laws indicated that the eldest son should receive a double portion (Deut 21:15-17). That brothers should live together without dividing the inheritance was optimal and praiseworthy. Some suggest that vv. 13-14 assume an elder brother who does not want to divide the inheritance and a younger brother who does. Others suggest the older brother is withholding an inheritance that should go to the younger. In either case the younger assumes that justice is on his side. However, when people approach Jesus for a decision on some issue, he often redirects the focus, as if to say "Look to yourself first."

Interpretation:

- Jesus is in the middle of encouraging his disciples to confess even when they are under duress, when he is interrupted by one of the crowd who wants Jesus to settle a financial dispute between siblings. Jesus, however, refuses to enter into the family squabble and instead uses the situation as an opportunity to teach about the seduction of wealth.
- **In interpreting this parable, it will be critical to assess carefully what the farmer's error is.** He is not portrayed as wicked – that is, he has not gained his wealth illegally or by taking advantage of others. Further, he is not portrayed as particularly greedy. Indeed, he seems to be somewhat surprised by his good fortune as he makes what appears to be reasonable plans to reap the abundance of the harvest. What is wrong, we might therefore ask, about building larger barns to store away some of today's bounty for a potentially leaner tomorrow?
- **Notice the farmer's consistent focus throughout the conversation he has with himself:** "What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?" Then 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...." There is no thought to using the abundance to help others, no expression of gratitude for his good fortune, no recognition of God at all. The farmer has fallen prey to worshiping the most popular of gods: the Unholy Trinity of "me, myself, and I."
- **This leads to, and is most likely caused by, a second mistake:** He is not foolish because he makes provision for the future; he is foolish because he believes that by his wealth he can *secure* his future: "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." He has all he believes he wants and more, yet at the end – which comes that very night – it proves inadequate.
- **The parable points to the uncertainty and fragility of life, but it is concerned most with God's verdict on those who trust in wealth.** Much of the concern is security, often for life itself, and whom one should fear. Most of the chapter teaches that people should fear the One who cares so much that fear is unnecessary! That means trusting in God and not material possessions. The intervention of death cuts short the man's plans and shows how foolish they were. His possessions are no basis for life and security.

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, pp. 394-400.

- **The parable emphasizes how little control the man actually has over his life, despite what he thinks.** His prosperity does not result from his effort; *the land* prospers (v. 16), not his work. Even what he thinks is most intimately his own — his soul — is only on loan and can be demanded at any time.
- At least until the intervention of God in v. 20 we are tempted to react positively to the man and say “Good for you!” **What did the man do wrong that brings the negative verdict?** Suggestions include that he ignored God, that he failed to plan for life beyond death, and that he was self-centered and inattentive to the needs of others. These options are not necessarily mutually exclusive. C. Hedrick is correct in saying the story raises in a dramatic way the question of the meaning of life. The parable then functions as a commentary on the second half of 12:15 (life does not consist in abundance of possessions).
- **Like the fool in Psalm 14:1, the man left God out of the picture.** He sought security in possessions, but possessions do not give security, and life does not consist in “stuff.” The man is the antithesis of Jesus’ teaching that a disciple is to deny self and that the one who wishes to save life loses it (Luke 9:23-24). The real issue is the focus of life. The fool’s focus was on preparing things for himself (vv. 20-21). Foolishness consists in thinking that responsibilities end with securing one’s own economic future. Life should not be focused on self, but on God and his purposes (“being rich toward God”).
- **Ultimately, the parable does not teach about wealth but warns against thinking that possessions are life.** The explanation in v. 21 extends the parable to make clear that focus on possessions for oneself leads to becoming poor with God. The parable is a brief but moving demonstration that life is not about plans for our own security and that satisfaction from possessions is an illusion.

Applying the Parable:

- Parables like this strike a tender nerve, especially when we admit to ourselves—as we must—that **we want to be like the rich fool**. We want to say to ourselves “I have many good things (or a lot of money) laid up for many years; eat, drink, and celebrate.” The message of this parable is as antithetical to our thinking as any Jesus told. I know of no more difficult topic to apply personally or to the lives of modern Western Christians. Our primary pursuits are our own security and pleasure—both, we think, achieved by possessions.
- However, one could in fact say—at least as far as Jesus and Luke are concerned—that **possessions are one of the chief obstacles to salvation and life with God**. Certainly resources are needed for life and ministry, as, for example, the women supporting Jesus’ ministry knew (Luke 8:3). Further, resources are needed to make resources grow. The fault is not in the possessions themselves, but in how tightly we cling to them or the use we make of them (or refuse to make of them). The issue is the focus of our lives and the way that focus determines the use of our possessions.
- **The parable underscores that life is fragile and uncertain and that one needs more than possessions.** All of us know this truism, but often it has no impact on our lives. Few in Western society live as if possessions and security are not the most important aspects of life. This chapter of Luke opposes the idolatry of security and urges a profound trust in God, not money.
- It is worth stating that **parables like this are not merely for the wealthy**. A person does not have to be wealthy to be like the rich fool. It may be easier for the wealthy to “treasure up for themselves,” but those without resources can be just as driven by greed and just as wrongly focused on things instead of God.
- **The parable’s message comes in Jesus’ final three words: rich toward God.** The Greek word for *rich* is not a noun in this sentence but a verb. “Rich toward God” takes *action*. Rich toward God suggests how we direct our wealth, how we use our resources. Rich toward God summons an expansive vision of how we use what we have for the sake of others. Rich toward God includes neighbor and stranger, family and friend, society and church. Our practice of rich toward God takes its cue from God’s richness toward us in creation, in redemption.

- **In the parable, the person's obsession with *I* and *my* stands in sharp contrast to other words of Jesus: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves."** Self-denial, as revealed in the parable of the rich fool, simply rejects the self as center of the universe. Self-denial, as revealed in the parable, just as significantly invites life that is rich toward God and the community sustained by God. Life is not about taking care of only ourselves. To be "rich toward God" means to reflect the character of God in all our relationships.
- It is not that God doesn't want us to save for retirement or future needs. It is not that God doesn't want us to "eat, drink, and be merry" and enjoy what God has given us. We know from the Gospels that Jesus spent time eating and drinking with people and enjoying life. But he was also clear about where his true security lay. **It is all about priorities. It is about who is truly God in our lives.** It is about how we invest our lives and the gifts that God has given us. It is about how our lives are fundamentally aligned: toward ourselves and our passing desires, or toward God and our neighbor, toward God's mission to bless and redeem the world.
- **Our lives and possessions are not our own. They belong to God. We are merely stewards of them for the time God has given us on this earth.** We rebel against this truth because we want to be in charge of our lives and our stuff. Yet this truth is actually good news. **Because all that we are and all that we have belongs to God, our future is secure beyond all measure.** So Jesus tells us, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (12:32).

Discussion

1. Why do you think it is so difficult to put God first in our lives?
2. Reflect on the phrase, "Rich toward God." What does it mean to you? What does it look like in practice?
3. Make a list of your five most important material possessions. What makes them valuable to you? Consider that list in tandem with the practice of being "rich toward God." In what ways does such richness influence the way you view and use those possessions?
4. How did Jesus seek to change attitudes and behaviors with this parables? How does parable challenge us today? What specific idea or statement from this parable stands out most for you and why?
5. What is one practical step that would enable you to become a more faithful steward both long-term and also in the days ahead? What does this step look like in practice?

Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31)²

For additional study on parables about wealth, notes for this parable are included below.

Of all the NT writers, Luke has the most to say about the poor. In fact, Jesus talks about poverty more in Luke than in all the other Gospels combined. Perhaps Luke knows of many poor people in the churches; perhaps he has a background in dealing personally with the poor; or maybe Luke simply has discovered that Jesus was constantly showing concern for the poor. In any case, the reader can hardly read more than a page in Luke without being confronted with Jesus' love for the poor.

Background:

- **The Rich Man's Attire:** Numerous texts attest to linen and purple clothing as marks of luxurious living, particularly fitting for royalty and those proud of their wealth. Purple was rare and expensive because of the difficult process of obtaining the best dye from marine snails.
- **Lazarus's Condition:** Both Lazarus's running sores and the dogs licking his sores would have rendered him ritually impure. The dogs were not household pets helping him, but scavengers seeking nourishment.
- **Burial:** Many Jews would assume that the rich man was blessed by God and that the poor man was cursed (cf. John 9:2 and Job). Burial was extremely important in the ancient world, and not being buried was viewed as a sign of God's curse. Lazarus's burial is not mentioned, but his reception in Abraham's side subverts any thought that he is cursed. His name, which means "God helps," would as well, if readers knew of the name's significance.
- **The Side (Bosom) of Abraham:** The side of Abraham is clearly an image of honor and may also point to intimacy, but most likely Luke intends his reader to think of the future banquet in God's kingdom and of Lazarus having the place of honor at the table next to Abraham.

Interpretation:

- The parable's primary teaching is not about wealth and poverty generally. **It is specifically a warning to the wealthy for their neglect of the poor.** As the reference to Moses and the prophets indicates, the message of the parable was not limited to the time of the in-breaking of the kingdom. On the other hand, the proclamation of the presence of the kingdom would heighten the need for repentance. Repentance in view of the kingdom means the right use of wealth and the repudiation of wealth and injustice.
- As in the parables of the Good Samaritan, the Two Debtors, and the Sheep and the Goats, even though it is not explicit, **the issue here is the willingness and ability to see a person in need and respond.** The rich man's wealth and self-centeredness do not allow him to see Lazarus. If Jesus asked Simon, "Do you see this woman?" (Luke 7:44), he could as well have asked the rich man, "Do you see Lazarus?" The ability to see is the mark of Christian discipleship.
- The rich man's plea that someone be sent to his brothers implies that he was not aware of his responsibility for the poor. The dialogue in vv. 27-31 dismiss this complaint. Moses and the prophets are fully clear about issues of justice and assistance for the poor. The actions required at the coming of the kingdom are the actions God always wanted from humans. Also obvious here is the rejection of any request for a sign (the rich man says his brothers will repent if someone from the dead goes to them), which fits with Jesus' refusal to give signs elsewhere.
- The parable is left open-ended. Will the five brothers repent? The reader must answer this question for himself or herself before it is too late.

² Snodgrass, pp. 425-34.

Applying the Parable:

- For centuries we have been cautioned against sanctifying all poverty and vilifying all wealth, which is fair. Poverty is not a gift from God, but a problem—often the result of sin by numerous people—that needs relieving. Wealth may indeed be a blessing of God and the result of hard work, but also wealth “is a veil for many evils.”
- **What the parable attacks is a particular kind of wealth, wealth that does not see poverty and suffering.** It attacks the idea that possessions are for one’s own use and that they are owned without responsibility to God and other people. This is not, as some have feared, an “opiate for the poor” which will keep them satisfied with a handout. The parable does not tell us how the wealthy are to assist the poor, but it insists that the poor are brothers and sisters of the wealthy and that injustice cannot be tolerated.
- Increasingly our societies are divided into the haves and the have-nots. In many countries the disparity is obscene. In urban areas wealthy developments frequently overshadow poverty-stricken neighborhoods. And today Lazarus is still at the gate. Parables like this one insist that Christians must not be like the rich man who cares only for his own kind and cannot see the poor until it is too late. We dare not have a gospel with an evangelistic emphasis and no concern for the poor. **Any gospel that is not good news to the poor is not the gospel of Jesus** (see Luke 4:18-22).
- Other obvious lessons lie on the surface of this parable. It reminds us that special signs are not required to know the will of God, nor will they convince those who do not wish to obey. It underscores that the Hebrew Scriptures—not merely the Law, but the Law and the prophets read together—already mark out the will of God.
- Numerous questions exist about how individuals and churches should help poor people. Let us have our discussions about how we should act and the problems to avoid. But God forbid that we not see, not care, and not act to alleviate the plight of the poor. **We must open our eyes to see Lazarus at the gate.**