

The Rich Fool

Scripture Text: Luke 12:13-34

Lesson Synopsis: Students will explore Jesus' teaching on riches by looking specifically at the topics of greed and worry. Of special importance will be the shift of focus from physical possessions to the things of God.

Digging In

The Occasion for the Story

Before digging into the Parable of the Rich Fool, it is important to note that the parable is occasioned by a real event. 12:1 tells us that Jesus is teaching amidst "a crowd of many thousands," and in 12:13, a member of this great crowd makes a request. "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me," he says. In making this request, the man treats Jesus as a Rabbi who wields authority to arbitrate the dispute.ⁱ However, while the man names Jesus as one with authority, he also believes that Jesus' answer will be a foregone conclusion. As David Garland notes, "It is one thing to say, 'Rabbi, my brother and I are at odds over our inheritance, would it be possible for you to mediate ... This [man], by contrast, commands Jesus to assert his authority to do what he has already decided needs to be done...'"ⁱⁱ Perhaps the man is convinced of his case in making the request in this way, or it may be that he hopes to use Jesus to his own ends.

While the man's motives are never named explicitly, it seems that Jesus senses greed at the bottom of the man's request.ⁱⁱⁱ As such, he refuses to arbitrate the dispute and uses the request as a springboard into a teaching on greed. "Watch out!" he says. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." In offering this warning, Jesus points the man and the crowd away from greed and to "a different understanding of life"^{iv} that is careful to place possessions in their proper place. Life cannot be measured by the things a person owns, and if this is so, then other considerations must be celebrated in measuring a life. With this truth stated, Jesus launches into a parable that brings it to life.

The Parable of the Rich Fool

The Parable of the Rich Fool is short and to the point. A rich man yields a harvest from his land that is so abundant that he has no room to store the surplus. As such, he is

faced with the quandary of what to do with this unexpected bounty. In response, he plans to tear down his barns in order to build bigger barns in their places that will provide space for the excess grain. With this plan in mind, he reveals the motivation behind it in imagining what he will say to himself when his fortune is secured: “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” While the man is pleased with his plan for security and the easy life, God is not. Instead, God thunders into the parable, saying, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” Jesus ends the parable by saying, “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

Taking a closer look at the parable, several points present themselves for closer examination. First, the presence of God is lacking from both the man’s discovery of his bounty and his scheming on what to do with it. Garland shows the scandalous nature of this aspect of the parable in noting, “That ‘the land ... produced a good crop’ is another way of saying that God produced it ... The Hebrews assumed that everything belonged to God...”^v While this would have been a truism of the man’s culture, he “gives no acknowledgment of God for his bounty.”^{vi} In the end, God must enter the parable by force as he pronounces judgment on the man who can no longer ignore him.

Second, even as the man fails to acknowledge God, he is constantly acknowledging himself. Several commentators note that the man is repeatedly saying “I” and “my” in his speech.^{vii} His attention is squarely focused on himself, and he has little room for other considerations. Perhaps it is no surprise that God is absent from this part of the parable!

Third, the man is condemned for hoarding his resources for himself. As has already been stated, this parable acts as a kind of commentary of Jesus’ caution against greed. Often we think of greed as always wanting more. In the parable, however, “the essence of greed is keeping what resources God brings your way for yourself.”^{viii} Rather than talking about grasping for more, though this would also fall under the heading of greed, Jesus addresses in this parable what we do with what we already have. For the man in the parable, his greed is compounded by the fact that he was rich before the good harvest (12:16). Thus, he is already a person of means when he moves to secure the harvest for himself. This focus on what the man does with what he already has stands as a challenging redefinition of greed to include a wider sphere.

Fourth, Jesus describes the man as “not rich toward God” (12:21). This is an important commentary on a man who is described early on as “rich” (12:16). His richness, as this description makes apparent, is turned toward himself rather than toward God. In this, we hear an important explanation of riches. As Darrell Bock explains, “Richness towards God means responding to life and blessing in a way that he desires, in a way that honors him – through service and compassion...” In Jesus’ words, we hear the truth that our resources are not separated from our piety. Instead, our use of resources should be employed in a manner that can be described as “rich toward God.” When we fail to act in ways rich toward God, we can hear the thundering

condemnation of God in the parable, “You fool!” Fool in this usage refers to “one who rejects the knowledge and precepts of God as a basis for life.”^{ix} As the parable plainly shows, the precepts of God apply unapologetically to the subject of our wealth.

Worry and Trust

Rather than leaving his teaching on greed after giving “The Parable of the Rich Fool,” Jesus continues it by focusing on another faulty approach to resources: worry. As he moves into this part of the teaching, Jesus echoes his statement from 12:15, which warned against greed and argued that “life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” Now, in 12:22, Jesus counsels against worrying about food and clothing and argues that “life is more than food, and the body more than clothes.” While the specific topics of these passages differ, their thrusts are the same in that both call people to look past their greed or worry to other considerations in life. Just as greed can come to consume our vision (as it did in the case of the rich fool), so can worry about the necessities of life come to dominate our focus. Of course, this teaching does not call Jesus’ disciples to become ignorant of the necessities of life,^x nor does it excuse them from helping those who lack such necessities because “life is more than food.”^{xi} Instead, Jesus teaches here that his disciples should value such necessities rightly and trust in God for their supply. As we will see momentarily, taking Jesus seriously on these counts leads to generosity.

In pursuit of the theme of trusting God for provision, Jesus employs two illustrations. First, in regard to food, he speaks of God’s feeding ravens, which do not store up food for themselves. Second, in regard to clothing, Jesus references the flowers, which “do not labor or spin” but are nonetheless clothed by God in a splendor greater than that of King Solomon, who led the Israelite kingdom to unprecedented wealth. The idea behind both of these illustrations is that God’s children are worth more to God than ravens or flowers, and as such they can expect God to care for them as well. Couched between these exhortations to trust stands a shrewd commentary on worry, which can’t even “add a single hour to your life” (12:25) and is therefore a useless exercise. This counsel against worry is reprised in v 29, where Jesus tells his followers not to set their hearts on or worry about what they will eat or drink (12:29). While the surrounding world may indeed “run after” these things, the disciple of Jesus rests in the knowledge that God knows what she needs. With this knowledge, she can turn her attention to the things of God. As v 31 states, “But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.” The thrust of these verses is clear: Worry is counterproductive to the disciple, who can trust in God for provision for life’s necessities. Moreover, this trust leads to a fuller concern about the things of God, which can now be pursued in confidence that God will provide what is needed along the way.

With all of this said, Jesus now moves to close his teaching on greed and worry by exhorting his disciples to lead generous lives that will count for them as treasures in heaven. Because they have been freed from greed and worry that lead to grasping for

things of this world that will rust and fade, they are able to invest in eternal matters. One way of doing this is through generosity. Jesus' disciples are to sell their possessions and give to the poor. Importantly, this command is not to sell all possessions (as Jesus tells the rich young man in 18:22), but it is a challenging teaching nonetheless. Generosity is a byproduct of trusting God and rejecting greed and points to a better use of resources than hoarding for ourselves.

Application

Discipleship and Wealth

Perhaps the best place to begin in seeking application from these texts is to note that discipleship and wealth cannot be separated in the life of the believer. As these passages show, Jesus did not shy away from topics of wealth and possessions. Instead, he spoke forcefully about them, calling his followers to be "rich toward God" in their use of wealth. If we are to take Jesus seriously, then we must hear what he has to say about our pocket books. Below are several points for consideration.

Greed and Worry

In these passages, Jesus addresses two faulty approaches to possessions. The first approach is that of greed, which drives us to grasp and hoard for our own use and comfort. The second approach is worry, which drives us to pursue security above all else. According to Jesus, neither of these approaches befits the life of his followers. Rather than being greedy, he calls us to be "rich toward God," meaning that we should use our resources in ways that honor God. Rather than giving ourselves over to worry, Jesus calls us to trust God to supply our needs and to seek his kingdom rather than security. Importantly, Jesus does not call us in these teachings to become irresponsible with our wealth. Instead, he calls us to view wealth properly. Life is more than possessions and is even more than the essentials of food and clothing. When we allow any of these things to take on unhealthy importance, they cause us to forget God's kingdom. When we approach wealth and possessions rightly, we are set free to focus on the things of God, making our resources available for his purposes and trusting that he will supply our needs.

Generosity

As Jesus speaks of wealth, generosity comes to a place of prominence. The rich fool is chastised for keeping everything for himself. While not stated directly, it seems that a better use of his bounty would have been to share with the needy in his community. After all, being "rich toward God" also means being rich toward people. We

can think here of Matthew 25:40, where Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me,” or Mark 9:37, where he says, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me...” Jesus seems to have a habit of identifying himself with the least in our midst, and he calls us to care for them. In the present passage, this becomes obvious as he calls his followers to sell their possessions and give to the poor. Of course, the call to generosity does not mean that we must destitute ourselves, but it does call us to discern between our need and our greed. Because God is our Father, we can enjoy the blessings he supplies us. After all, they are gifts! But also because God is our Father, we should carry the family name well by being generous with our excess.

Remembering God

A last note that encapsulates the others is that we should remember God when we assess our wealth. The rich man’s greed caused him to forget God, and worry can cause us to do the same. As disciples of Jesus, we should always strive to bring God back into the equation. We can do this by viewing our bounty as his gift and ourselves as his stewards. As God’s stewards, we affirm that all we have is his and is therefore at his disposal. When we take this approach to riches, we become “rich toward God.” Not only this, we also invest our resources eternally. As Jesus says, “Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys” (12:33).

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, “When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?” Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.^{xii}

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week’s readings in the gospel of Luke that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let the class know that today’s lesson will come from Saturday’s reading and will focus on Luke 12:13-34. Invite students to open their Bibles to that passage.

- **Opening Question:** How would you describe a person who is good with money?

- **Explain:** Explain that today we will see what Jesus has to say about money and possessions.

The Occasion for the Teaching

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 12:13-15.
 - **Question:** Jesus is teaching in a huge crowd and is interrupted by a question. What does the interrupter request?
 - **Explain:** Explain that the man is treating Jesus as a Rabbi who can arbitrate these kinds of disputes.
 - **Question:** What is Jesus' response?
 - **Question:** Why do you think that Jesus refuses to arbitrate the dispute?
 - **Explain:** Explain that Jesus seems to detect greed as the man's motivation and uses the question to begin a teaching on greed.
 - **Question:** What do you think Jesus means when he says that "life does not consist in an abundance of possessions?"

The Parable of the Rich Fool

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 12:16-21.
 - **Question:** In the parable, a rich man has a good harvest. What does he decide to do with it?
 - **Question:** How do you think our culture would describe this man?
 - **Question:** How does God describe the man?
 - **Question:** Why does God call the man a fool?
 - **Question:** At the end of the parable, Jesus talks about people who store up things for themselves but are not "rich toward God." What would it have looked like for the man to have been rich toward God in this parable?
 - **Discussion Help:** Note that the man's greed leads him to think only of himself. For him to have been rich toward God, he would have needed to shift his vision to God.
 - **Question:** What does it mean for us to be rich toward God when it comes to our money and possessions?
 - **Discussion Help:** We should seek to avoid greed in favor of using our possessions in a way that is rich toward God.

Worry and Trust

- **Explain:** Explain that while the parable is over, Jesus is not done talking about money and possessions. Whereas before he spoke of greed, now he will turn his attention to worry.
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 12:22-31.
 - **Question:** We know that greed isn't a good thing, but what about worry? Why might worry be a problem for people of faith?

- **Question:** What is Jesus' attitude toward worry in this passage?
- **Question:** According to Jesus, why shouldn't we worry about the necessities of life?
 - **Discussion Help:** This question has two answers. First, "life is more than food, and the body more than clothes." Second, we can trust that God will provide.
- **Question:** Do you think that it is easy to trust God for what we need?
- **Question:** Does anyone have a story of God providing for their needs that they would like to share?
- **Question:** Do you think that not worrying about the necessities of life means that we should ignore them?
 - **Discussion Help:** I would say here that Jesus is not telling us to neglect ourselves. Instead, he is cautioning us against putting so much focus on these things that we lose sight of God.
- **Question:** According to Jesus, what should we do instead of worrying about the necessities of life? (See v. 31)
- **Question:** What do you think that it means to "seek his kingdom?"
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 12:32-34
 - **Question:** Why do think that Jesus tells us not to be afraid before telling us to sell our possessions and give to the poor?
 - **Question:** Do you think that this is an easy or hard command?
 - **Question:** At what point have we done enough?
 - **Discussion Help:** In this passage, Jesus does not say that we should sell all of our possessions. Instead, he points us in the direction of generosity. We have done enough when we can say that we have sought first God's kingdom and been rich toward God.
 - **Question:** According to Jesus, what are we doing when we give to the poor?

Recap

- **Question:** At the beginning of the lesson, we asked how our culture would describe a person who is good with money. How do you think Jesus would describe a person who is good with money? Are the pictures different or the same.
- **Question:** Why is greed dangerous to Christians?
- **Question:** Why is worry dangerous to Christians?
- **Question:** What should we do to avoid greed and worry?
- **Question:** Is there anything in particular that you think we should take home from this lesson?

ⁱ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text--to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 343.

ⁱⁱ David E. Garland, *Luke*, vol. 3, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan,, 2011), 513.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Allen Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 255.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Garland, *Luke*, 3:513–514.

^{vi} Ibid., 3:514.

^{vii} Bock, *Luke*, 344; Garland, *Luke*, 3:514; Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 256.

^{viii} Bock, *Luke*, 344.

^{ix} Walter L. Liefeld and David W. Pao, "Luke," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, vol. 10 (Zondervan, 2007), 222.

^x Garland, *Luke*, 3:517.

^{xi} Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 259.

^{xii} Question taken from: "Funny Icebreaker Questions," *Buzzle*, accessed March 14, 2014, <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/funny-icebreaker-questions.html>.