

## Rich Toward God

### Scripture Passage: Luke 12:13-21, NRSV

(13) *Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."*

(14) *But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"*

(15) *And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."*

(16) *Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly.*

(17) *And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'*

(18) *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.*

(19) *And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*

(20) *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?'*

(21) *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."*

### Introduction:

One of the primary teaching methods of Jesus was the use of parables, an earthly story for the purpose of uncovering a deeper spiritual meaning. The oral tradition of first century Judaism was the means by which people heard and remembered truths communicated by Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God.

### Background and Context:

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus made specific reference to the fact that there was coming a time when truth and light will reveal the darkness and deception of people's lives. He exposes the duplicity of the Pharisees, who were living a religious and pious life on the outside, while hardness and darkness reigned on the inside. Against this background, someone in the crowd admonishes Jesus to tell his brother to "divide the inheritance with me" (vs.13).

On one hand it seems to be an obscure part of the passage, yet is essential to its message. Matthew Henry places this verse in its Old Testament context where the firstborn son receives a double portion of the inheritance. "He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him" (Deuteronomy 21:17 NIV). Of the various interpretations, Henry leans toward the view that "he had a mind to do his brother wrong, and would have Christ to assist him; that, whereas the law gave the elder brother a double portion of the estate, and the father himself could not dispose of what he had but by that rule...he would have Christ to alter that law, and oblige his brother, who perhaps was a follower of Christ at large, to divide the inheritance equally with him...share and share alike, and to allot him as much as his elder brother." (Henry).

The reason that Matthew Henry leans toward this position is that "Christ takes occasion from it to warn against covetousness, pleonexia - a desire of having more, more than God in his providence has allotted us. It was not a lawful desire of getting his own, but a sinful desire of getting more than his own" (Henry).

There are many examples of inheritance issues that turn one family member against another, especially when it comes to getting one's fair share. Greed, while lying dormant can quickly surface given the right circumstances. As such we should always be vigilant against the temptation to find significance and worth in the abundance of our

possessions.

As the narrative unfolds, we find another Old Testament directive to leave some of the harvest behind for the welfare of others. The land which produced the harvest is itself a gift from God. As such, it was always intended for the benefit of all. The use of the soil was considered a matter of stewardship. Ray Dunning, in his book *Reflecting the Divine Image* says it well: “Landowners were not to glean their fields and were to leave the corners unharvested so that the poor could glean the grain freely. This supplied the poor with both sustenance and the dignity of work in gathering their own harvest” (Dunning 2003, 112). “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest” (Leviticus 19:9 NIV). Severson, in *Scandalous Obligation*, takes this directive a bit deeper: “This gesture of hospitality was extended to even those who were (or potentially) their enemies (Severson 2011, 53).

In sharp contrast to this perspective, the rich man in the parable assumed ownership over land that never really belonged to him in the first place. To assume one’s right of self-sufficiency is fertile ground for greed. Here in this parable, Jesus exposes the deception and consequences of self-indulgence, speaking truth into the heart of the situation. As such, this parable provides a sharp contrast between a self-serving life and one that is rich toward God.

### 1) Life That is Self-Serving

All of us are susceptible to the deception of greed; it can quickly overtake our lives. “I have acquired much due to my own efforts; as such I can do what I want with what I have earned.” There is the overwhelming temptation to always want more, never content with what we have. The response of the rich man in this parable was to gather the entire harvest, build bigger barns and simply enjoy life. His life was self-centered in every way.

A similar mindset is present in our world. Bigger is better; success means acquiring ever increasing assets. It is also prevalent in some Christian circles to try and convince you that God wants to bless and give you more in order to make you truly happy. In response to this directive, James, like Jesus, gives a clear warning concerning the consequences of such deception: “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. (2) Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. (3) Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days” (James 5:1-3 NIV). All of the things that we see as being valuable are temporal and decaying. We have no control over our time on earth. No one knows what a day will bring or how quickly life will pass. An unexpected phone call or report from the doctor can change the trajectory of our lives in an instant. Every day is a gift of God. As we see in this parable, the next breath is never guaranteed; life was about to end for the rich man. We cannot take what we have earned in this life into the next.

The exposure of this truth reveals the consequences of our choices. What we have sown is what we will reap: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. (8) Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Galatians 6:7-8 NIV).

William Ernest Henley, in his famous poem, *Invictus*, portrays a world view that believes I can live my life independent of God and others. While dealing with significant personal and health issues, he is an example of one who refused to look up, but rather looked within for the meaning of life. Perhaps the ultimate temptation is to believe that we are the “captain of our soul”.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul. (Henley 2016)

## 2) Life That is Rich Toward God

What Jesus really wanted was for this man to be generous toward others and as such, rich toward God. The prayer attributed to St. Francis portrays this desire: “For it is in giving that we receive” (Genius Prayer of St. Francis n.d.).

Complementing the parable in Luke, Matthew’s gospel picks up a similar theme: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. (20) But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. (21) For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21 NIV).

Once again, the essential issue that Jesus addresses is the orientation of one’s heart in relation to one’s treasure. Inward purity is the only solution for self-centered living and greed, which is always at enmity with the nature and purpose of God. Mildred Wynkoop, in her book *A Theology of Love*, clearly articulates the necessity of a clean heart. “Without it, Christian life is a smothering of life’s impulses, and grace would be an enemy of normal personality. There is a basic urge to self-expression without which wholesome personality is impossible. An impure urge is death. God does not suppress the urge but cleanses the heart of double motives” (Wynkoop 1972, 361). Holiness transforms self-interest into sacrificial service and self-gain into abundant generosity.

What a joy to be part of a Church that proclaims not only the possibility, but the reality of a single minded (rich) heart toward God. From this wonderful work of grace flows a life of compassion and generosity toward those who have never heard the good news of Jesus. Because of his love for all people, we are given many divinely appointed opportunities to give joyfully and liberally. Through regular, faithful and sacrificial giving we sow good seed into good soil. God will make it grow and the harvest will be abundant. It is an investment that will reap dividends far beyond the breadth and scope of our life. As we respond in obedience we become “doers of the word...not hearers only...” (James 1:22 KJV). Funding the mission to make ‘Christlike disciples in the nations’ is both a privilege and a responsibility. We are called to embrace with generous stewardship the many gifts that God has entrusted to us. This is the essence of what it means to be a good and faithful servant, one who is truly rich toward God.

## Closing Personal Illustration

I had the wonderful privilege of being raised on a family farm. My father was a market-gardner, growing and selling a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. His stewardship of the land informed his heart toward others. I can remember days when after the harvest was over he would invite people who were finding it difficult to make ends meet to come and gather up the remainder of the crop left behind. It was not uncommon for him to pack up a load of vegetables to help feed others. Mission giving was always a high priority. While he has been gone for many years now, I know that the seeds of generosity he planted continue to reap a harvest of righteousness. What a wonderful heritage I have received from a godly and generous man who was in every way rich toward God!

## References

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