

## No Greater Desire

### 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:

Do you ever have spiritual epiphanies? I am talking about one of those moments when the truths of life seem to suddenly lay bare before your eyes. There is a story about Saint Francis of Assisi before he became the poor, world-changing monk. One day Francis, the twenty-five year old son of a rich noble, was riding his horse through the Italian countryside. As he trotted along the road he came upon a leper. At first, Francis was repelled by the man's deformity, but felt that God would want him to greet the man. Obediently, Francis jumped down from his horse and kissed the leper's hand. The leper returned his kiss of peace and immediately Francis was filled with surprising joy. This became a defining memory for young Francis. In that moment, it was revealed to him that he could find Christ in the faces of the poor and marginalized. God had invited him into that moment of epiphany.

You may have had similar experiences of God inviting you into new realizations. Perhaps it was a fresh thought that came to you, or you shared a meaningful conversation, or you read something that gave you an eternal perspective. Throughout our lives God invites us into moments of glorious awareness that life is more than what we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands. In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 12, verses 13-21, Jesus presents an invitation to a great crowd of listeners to enter into such a moment of eternal clarity.

Out of the four Gospels in our Bible, Luke's Gospel stands out for its revolutionary teachings of wealth and earthly possessions. Jesus' concern in this Gospel is almost always help for the poor and turning the world's system of values on its head. If you find yourself worn out by chasing after life's fleeting attainments, then Jesus has a message for you in the Gospel of Luke. He consistently teaches his disciples, and by extension, us, that there is a deeper, fuller life being offered in God. At issue are misplaced desires and values. The esteemed theologian C.S. Lewis provides us with a helpful illustration in his published sermon, *The Weight of Glory*:

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

God is faithful to give us moments of epiphany when our lesser desires are shown empty and he offers us a greater desire of true life and joy. These lesser desires may not only be drink, sex, and ambition, the ones Lewis suggested. They could also include the desire to be comfortable, to be understood, to be accepted, to be known, to advance in a career, to be impressive, or to be well liked. To be clear, these desires are not bad. For when even a good desire inevitably competes with the desire for the true life that Christ offers, it will become detrimental. Could it be that when we elevate these things in our hearts, we are settling for something less? Is there a deeper desire being offered that might actually bring us satisfaction?

In Luke 12:13-21 Jesus tells the story of a man's misplaced values. He invites people to consider an eternal perspective. Jesus' concern is to reshape the values of his listeners. In this passage Jesus reveals the emptiness of too weak desires and offers instead a deeper, holy life.

The scene unfolding in Luke 13:13 is of Jesus teaching a crowd of thousands, when someone from among that crowd says to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" (NIV). This seems to be an understandable request from the man in the crowd. Jesus is a person of authority and this man is seeking justice in his family affairs. The man wants fairness. While this may come as a shocker to us, Jesus' concern does not appear to be fairness. Jesus cares more about the values and treasures of the heart. Jesus perceives the orienting values that lie behind the man's question. We are not told what is in the heart of this man, but the assumption is that Jesus knows. And so Jesus sidesteps the question, saying to him in verse 14, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?"

Jesus then uses this opportunity to correct the value system of not only this man, but all those listening in the crowd. Jesus tells a story, a parable, to serve as a warning against all types of greed and to illustrate that "life does not consist in an abundance of possessions" (v.15). The story begins, "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest" (v.16). When the people in this crowd hear that a man has an abundant harvest, they were not thinking, "what a stroke of luck!" Instead, the perception in that time and culture was that God is the bringer of rain, sun, seed, and soil. In this opening statement what the crowd would have heard was that God sent a blessing of abundance to a rich man. This is important and should not be brushed over. God provides this man the gift of opportunity. God blesses him with resources beyond what he needs. A door has been opened, full of possibilities. What will the man do with this opportunity?

The blessing this man receives is so great, he does not even have enough room to fit all the crops. His barns are too small. The man's response to the opportunity reflects his underlying values. The man says, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry'" (vv.18-19). Many of us might recognize this automatic response from the man, for we may often find it in ourselves. He desires to be set for life. Can we not relate to the desire to have no worries, and simply enjoy life? But Jesus is determined to expose the emptiness of this pursuit. C.S. Lewis might have called this man's desires "too weak." He is settling for mud pies, when the gift of opportunity was God's invitation to something far greater.

Jesus illustrates the folly of a life dictated by greed and comfort with the conclusion of the parable. In a dramatic twist of fortunes, God says to the rich man, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" Jesus drives home this truth: at our deaths we will not take any earthly possessions with us. The folly of the rich man is laid bare for all to see. The pursuit of being set for life is proved an empty one. Jesus wants to make clear to everyone that this man was about to squander the gift of opportunity God had given him.

This is Jesus' invitation to the crowd of thousands to enter into a moment of eternal clarity or spiritual epiphany. We take nothing with us upon our deaths. The accumulation of earthly possessions is not eternally beneficial. Jesus wants to usher the crowd into a review of their own lives. The intent of the parable is that we might put ourselves in the shoes of the rich man. We are given, along with him, a view of our own lives through the lens of an eternal perspective.

The purpose of Jesus' teaching in this passage is not solely a warning against lesser desires. Concluding his story in verse 21, Jesus tells us what the best response is to God's gifts of opportunity: "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God." Jesus invites us to share a greater desire, which is that we might want to live a life that is lavishly generous towards God.

The message is strikingly similar to Luke 10, when Jesus is visiting the home of Mary and Martha. While Martha is distracted and distressed with preparations, Mary sat at the Lord's feet, listening to him. Jesus says to Martha, "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (10:42). Similarly, in the parable of chapter 12, Jesus teaches that being rich towards God is "what is better."

God is not selfish. He is not greedy for our wealth. Jesus makes very clear that to be rich toward God is to be rich toward others. Consistent generosity toward others and caring for the needy around you is a life lived lavishly toward God. The truth of the parable is that material resources are not lasting. There is nothing that comes to us in life, which has not first originated from God's hands. Jesus wants us to be rich toward God, because richness toward God leads to abundant life, true joy, and lasting investments. The desire to be rich toward God is the better way.

Bob Goff, author of *Love Does*, tells the story of his son, Rich, who played the game Bigger and Better with some neighborhood friends. If you are unfamiliar with the game, the premise is that you start with something of little value, like a button or old sock. You then knock on someone's door and ask to trade your item of little value for something bigger and better. Taking the bigger and better item you just received, you continue to knock on other doors, trading up the things you get.

Rich and his friends began their adventure with a dime. He scored big with the first door he knocked on, trading his dime for a mattress! As if that wasn't good enough, he traded up the mattress for a ping-pong table. Many people would have quit there, but Rich continued going door-to-door. At one point he even received a large elk head. At the end of a long day of trading, starting with just a dime, Rich drove home in a Dodge pickup truck. His father, Bob Goff, writes, "Do you know what Rich did with that truck? He gave it away. He drove it to a church down the street and tossed them the keys. He didn't need it and didn't want it and what he got in exchange for it was bigger and better still" (*Love Does*, 92).

Remember, in the Luke 12 parable, God gives the man an abundant harvest. We are to hear this as God gives the man the gift of opportunity. God is constantly giving his people gifts of opportunity. I think if we slowed down and paid attention to all the resources that pass through our own hands, we might realize how often God is giving us opportunities for generosity.

Imagine if we allowed God to make holy our values. Then perhaps our lesser desires might have less control over us and we would be freed to enjoy the greater desires. Rich's story shows us that being generous towards God not only leads to true life for us as individuals, but also life for others. Our being rich toward God is essential for the greater mission of God in this world. Jesus, to our great astonishment, chooses to work through his Church. He entrusts us with his mission to reconcile this broken world to himself. Richness toward God from his disciples is a necessity for the working of God's mission. This holy response to the opportunities God gives does not only mean life for us, but it means life for this world.

The prayer for our Church is that we may be recipients of God's epiphanies for an eternal perspective. May we not be people too easily pleased with lesser desires, but let our hearts desire what is better. And may our responses to God's provision be embodiments of richness toward God. Let it be so.