

A Fool and His Money

By Brad Allison on 5/23/2004

Scripture Reference *Luke 12:13-21*

We're studying the parables of Jesus, and we come today to this one called the rich fool. I don't know the origin of that phrase about a fool and his money being soon parted, but it seems to apply to this parable. We know this man was a fool because Jesus called him one, and we know that he was parted from his money much sooner than he expected. If we're going to understand the parable, we need to begin with its context, where we learn that the parable is about a silent killer. Like carbon monoxide, covetousness kills without our awareness of the danger. This parable is like one of those carbon monoxide alarms you can buy for your house. Let's begin by looking at this context.

This man who approached Jesus reminds me of many people I've come across over the years. While Jesus was teaching, the man was not really listening because he was preoccupied with a dispute he was having with his brother over the estate of their recently deceased father. Jewish law was clear on this matter. A father left two-thirds of the estate to the eldest son, and the remaining one-third was divided equally among the rest of the children. The hope of every father was that his children could live in unity on the land together and keep the entire estate intact. Such did not seem to be the case here. This younger brother wanted the estate to be divided so he could cash out his part of it. Again, Jewish law stated clearly that in such a case the property was to be divided. So this man had the law on his side. But the older brother was refusing, so the younger brother wanted Jesus to serve the common function of rabbis and render a judgment against his brother. Jesus' response is interesting. He refused to embrace such a role for himself, but sought to solve the problem at a deeper level. He saw that the real solution was to address the issue at the heart of it all—the covetousness of the younger brother. So he gives a warning against such covetousness and then tells this parable to address it.

The basic point of the parable is that covetousness is destructive and it is foolish. It is just like the report I read in the newspaper a couple of months ago about a 62-year-old man who came to the emergency room of Cholet General Hospital in western France in 2002, complaining of stomach pain. Doctors were shocked when x-rays revealed a large mass in his stomach that ended up weighing 12 pounds. During surgery to remove the mass, it was discovered that it consisted of about 350 coins the man had swallowed over a period of ten years. It had been so heavy that his stomach dropped between his hips. Twelve days after the surgery, the man died from complications (*Birmingham News*, 2-19-04). It is quite easy for us to see how foolish it is to swallow twelve pounds of coins, but maybe not so easy to see how destructive covetousness is. Jesus tells this parable to unmask it for the foolish thing it is. I want us to look at three truths about covetousness this morning. It is self-centered, isolating, and constitutes being poor toward God.

I. Covetousness Is Self-Centered

The man's selfishness is apparent in a couple of ways. The clearest indication of his self-centered nature can be seen if I read the text and give emphasis to the first person pronouns. "What shall *I* do, for *I* have nowhere to store *my* crops?" And he said, '*I* will do this: *I* will tear 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; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" His world was centered only on himself. Someone once remarked of a self-centered lady, "Edith lived in a little world, bounded on the north, south, east and west by Edith" (Barclay, p. 122).

We can also see his self-centeredness by noticing the absence of the proper center. The proper center for our lives is God, but such a center was noticeably absent in his life. Notice, for example, that he doesn't give proper credit for his riches. The parable begins, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully" (v. 16). The language is striking. The land produced, not the man. He was a farmer who did the same things year after year, and one year his lands produced abundantly. Everything from the perfect balance of rainfall and sunshine to the lack of pests resulted in a bumper crop. The difference between an abundant crop and one that is a total loss is the work of God, not that of man. Yet nowhere here do we read of any gratitude. What we get instead is an assumption that everything is his to use as he wants to use it. He behaves as if he alone is due complete credit for this abundance. Instead of believing that everything is his to use as he wants, a God-centered position would regard everything one has as on loan from God, with the result that it will one day need to be returned to God. The verb "required" in verse 20, when God says to the foolish man, "This night your soul *is required* of you," is a word that is commonly used for the return of a loan. If something belongs to you, it is true that you are permitted to use it as you desire. But the Christian view of things is that all of our money and our time belongs not to us but to God. And one day he will require it back from us. The loan will be called and God is going to want to know how we have used our resources for his ends.

I think all this will become clearer with a terrifying application. What is it that this man is doing in our passage? He is doing the same thing we do many times throughout the days and weeks of our lives. As he says, "In the future I will do this or that," he is making plans. His self-centeredness is seen in the plans he makes. The frightening thing about this passage to me is how natural it all seems. A man is confronted with a problem about the storage of his crops, and his solution seems so logical—increase the size of your storage capacity. He is doing nothing blatantly immoral. He's not plotting harm for anyone else. He's simply making a logical decision to solve a storage problem that developed as a result of a successful business. The logic of his solution cannot be faulted, but the assumption behind it is full of problems. He makes his plans in a self-centered way, never asking himself how God would have him do these things. It's not what is present in his plans that causes the problem, but what is absent. He fails to consider God. Do you do the same thing? For example, think about your plans for how you will use the time you have been given. What is your assumption in these plans? Do you simply start from the assumption that all the time of your day is yours to use as you desire for accomplishing your goals? With such an assumption, God gets tucked into the leftover places. This is especially clear in our use of money. If you start with a self-centered assumption that your money is yours to use as you desire, then what you will do is first satisfy all your desires for everything you want, and then give to God anything that is left over. Since satisfying our desires is like drinking seawater (the more you drink the more you want), God gets pushed out more and more. The problem lies in the area of where we start. If, like this man, we start with ourselves, we are foolish. If we would be wise, then we would start with God and a desire to honor him. We would ask the question, "How can I honor God with my time and my money?" Jesus urges us to take care to do just that.

II. Covetousness Is Isolating

There's something very interesting going on here that's easy to miss. In verse 17, when the man is coming to a decision about a solution to his storage problem, we read that "he thought to himself." The word for "thought" is actually a word that means to dialogue. This may not seem so strange to us, but to Jesus' original hearers, for a man to make such a decision by himself would have seemed quite strange. Kenneth Bailey lived with average people in the Middle East in an attempt to understand the cultural assumptions behind Jesus'

parables. Listen to something he says about our passage.

One of the striking features of the traditional Middle Easterner is his gregarious nature. Life is lived in tightly knit communities. The leading men of the village still “sit at the gate” and spend literally years talking to one another. The slightest transaction is worthy of hours of discussion. The present writer has engaged with the notables in such discussions in the gate and knows that often there seems to be a subtle pressure *not* to introduce the information that will settle the question under discussion. The reasoning seems to be—we have a wonderful discussion going, do not close it! In any case, the elder in such a community makes up his mind *in community*. He decides what he will do after hours of discussion with his friends. He does his thinking in a crowd. The text does not read, ‘he said to himself,’ as we have with the unjust steward (16:3) and unjust judge (18:4). Rather, this man dialogues with himself. He obviously has no one else with whom to talk... Thus we begin to get Jesus’ picture of the kind of prison that wealth can build.” p. 65

Even more pitiful is the final speech recorded by this foolish man. He has arrived financially in a big way, and his celebration speech is given not to a group of friends, but to himself. “And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

Is isolation a problem for you? It is for so many Americans, and followers of Christ are not immune to this. May I suggest to you that you may want to look at this as a possible cause for isolation in your life? There is this vortex of money and time use that conspires to isolate people from one another. We no longer need others for survival, and it becomes easier to isolate ourselves in a cocoon of our own making. That’s the kind of life this man found himself living.

III. Covetousness Is Being Poor Toward God

Jesus sums up our parable by saying that just as this man acted foolishly, so too all act foolishly who lay up treasure for themselves rather than being rich toward God. Covetousness is being poor toward God. God calls us to a God-centered life that is rich in generosity to him. That’s what he was calling this man to. Notice that he never considered what God wanted him to do with his surplus, in spite of the fact that God was the one who had given it. Augustine said that he would have counseled this rich man as follows when he was trying to solve his problem of insufficient storage space: “Thou *hast* barns—the bosoms of the needy, the houses of widows, the mouths of orphans and of infants.” It is true that such a barn is big enough for anything we would need to store there.

What does a life of being rich toward God look like? Christians have tried to answer that in various ways. John Newton was an 18th century preacher better known to us as the author of the hymn “Amazing Grace.” When a young husband wrote to Newton asking his advice on how much he should give to the poor, he wrote back as follows:

For the most part, we take care, first, to be well supplied, if possible, with all the necessities, conveniences, and not a few of the elegancies of life; then to have a snug fund laid up against a rainy day, as the phrase is . . . that when we look at children and near relatives, we may say to our hearts, “Now they are well provided for.” And when we have gotten all this and more, we are perhaps content, for the love of Christ, to bestow a pittance of our superfluities, a tenth or twentieth part of what we spend or hoard up for ourselves, upon the poor. But alas! What do we herein more than others? Multitudes who know nothing of the love of Christ will do thus much (quoted in Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, p. 69).

Then Newton goes on to recommend two guidelines for how much money to keep and how much to give. First, he says to choose a standard of living that is “barely decent.” He means by that a standard of living that is supplied only with the essentials. Then, second, he says to give away one penny for every one we keep over and above that bare minimum. In other words, give away 50% of discretionary income. Be rich toward God rather than toward self.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus introduced this parable by saying that life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions. Over the past several weeks, there have been several Monopoly games played in our house. If you’ve ever played that game, you know that the key to the game is having lots of money and the right properties. A fist full of Monopoly cash and several key monopolies with hotels on them will help you to win that game. The man in our parable today won the Monopoly game. If you’ve ever played that game, you know that generally the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. This man began the parable rich, because we read, “the land of a *rich* man produced plentifully.” But when the Monopoly game is over, the deeds for Park Place and Boardwalk are just pieces of paper. The cash too is just play money with no real value. In other words, in real life, Monopoly money is valueless. Jesus is making precisely that point here. In real life, the balance in your 401-K, the amount of your paycheck or the size of your house, these things don’t really matter. Having more of those things than most everyone else is like winning a Monopoly game. In the big picture, it doesn’t matter. How foolish to structure all of life around winning something that won’t last!

True life lies elsewhere. It lies in a relationship with God through Jesus. If you want such a relationship, our parable this morning gives us a helpful clue about how we can have one. I have pointed out how this man had a big problem with selfishness, and that it was his self-centeredness that got him into trouble. I know of very little that exposes our self-centeredness more than taking a good look at our generosity with our money and our time. Once you get serious about becoming generous with those two limited commodities, you will discover this monster called self. There is only one person in this entire universe who can save you from yourself, and that is Jesus. Without a daily dependence on him, you inevitably and instinctively make all the wrong decisions, just like the man in our parable. You end up swallowing coins like the Frenchman until you die from it. Life is found in Jesus, and he alone can rescue us from covetousness. So I invite you to trust in him and be delivered from a self-centered life into one of true life, filled with generosity.