

The Rich Fool

Date: 17 January 2021

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Stories along the Way (Parables in Luke)

Texts: Psalm 49; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; Luke 12:13-21

Toys

One of the great challenges of childhood is learning to share. As a missionary kid and an only child I found this a hard lesson to learn. I didn't have as many toys as some of my wealthy friends, and what I did have was precious and to be guarded jealously. I remember crying from grief and anger when I discovered my Mum had given away some of my cars to a friend in need. I've still got my Lego from when I was a kid and when I gave it to my kids to play with I made an unpleasant discovery. I still found it hard to share, especially when people don't look after things how you think they should, no matter how small or closely related to you they are! Let's just say I've still got a way to go when it comes to sharing Lego and being a dad.

Well today we're continuing our series *Stories along the Way*, looking at the parables in Luke's gospel that Jesus uses to teach people about what being a disciple looks like. Today we're looking at the parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12. Jesus here has some powerful teaching on how we are to approach wealth and possessions. His words are certainly something I know I need to hear and put to work in my life when it comes to sharing. And so I hope in the power of the Holy Spirit they might speak to you too whether you're a Christian or exploring faith. We're going to look at the Context for the parable, the parable itself, how Jesus applies the parable and finally a secret.

Context

So let's begin with the context for the parable. Have a look with me verse 13.

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

Behind this brief request lies a family tragedy. The father has died without leaving a will. According to Jewish law at the time his estate could not be divided until the older brother agreed. So it is the younger brother coming to Jesus asking him to arbitrate between them. How often and how sad it is that disputes over inheritance compound the grief of losing a parent. They can split a family apart. There is a matter of justice here, but so often that focus on money can blind us to other, more important things.

Jesus' abrupt, even rude response to the younger brother jolts him and the crowd; preparing them to call into question wealth as the frame of reference. Verse 14.

Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?'

This is a teachable moment, not just for the younger brother but also for the crowd and for us. Jesus continues with a warning, in one of those penetrating, memorable lines that cut to the heart of things.

15 Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.'

The word translated *greed*, could also be translated as *covetousness or avarice* - the insatiable desire for more. How might we think that life does consist of the abundance of possessions? You might have seen those T-shirts with the slogan "The one with the most toys wins". That is of course one of the dangers with wealth - that we can use it competitively with

others to make ourselves out to be better than others. Jesus however takes the problem of greed in a different direction in his story.

The parable

Read with me verse 16

16 And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. 17 He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops."

18 "Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. 19 And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

The story shines a spotlight onto how we can come to think our life consists in the abundance of possessions. On the one hand possessions, wealth, money can give us a sense of security. We think that because we have plenty stored away we'll be safe, whatever may come in life. Second, wealth can give us a sense of hope. Money lets you buy stuff that makes life easy, and with plenty of money you can kick back and enjoy life. Your hope for the future is one of a life of pleasure and ease.

These 2 temptations of wealth are ones that I suggest are in the oxygen of our culture. We live in one of the wealthiest countries on earth. We have all kinds of technology at our fingertips that make life easy. You want to go to the beach, well just hop in the car. You want some entertainment - turn on Netflix. You don't even have to cook or leave the house for a nice meal, just order Uber eats. One of the frustrations people have found with the pandemic is that it has spoiled holiday plans. What a hardship that you just can't take that trip to Europe or Bali! Our capitalist culture teaches us at every point that life does consist in the abundance of possessions; that we will find happiness through the accumulation of peak experiences, tailored to our every desire.

But read with me from verse 20.

20 'But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

Why is the rich man a fool? Because he has had eyes only for his wealth and his pleasure and has forgotten the horizon of death, and, as we heard last week, judgment. His life is suddenly cut short. Maz's painting captures his shock and dismay at this discovery. Wealth you see is no security against death. While it can buy fleeting pleasures in this life it is no guarantee of hope for the next. We have to leave the abundance of possessions and peak experiences at death's door. We brought nothing into this world and we can take nothing with us. All that we've worked for, all that we've stored away will be given to others. It is foolish to live forgetting death. The wise remember that they will die. Our culture does all it can to push death out of our vision. We medicalise and sanitise it. We package our elders away. We valourise youth and beauty and despise aging because we're terrified of being reminded that we too will die. We too will not always be in control and there's nothing we can do about it. And so we purchase all kinds of things to keep up the illusion that we're in control, and our

lives are secure. We run after one experience after another to distract ourselves from the reality of death.

Jesus' words are words to our culture, to us - *"You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"*

Application

So what are we to do? How can we escape the lie that our life consists in the abundance of possessions? Let's see Jesus' answer in verse 21.

21 'This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.'

Jesus says we are presented with a choice - to store up things for yourself or to be rich towards God. He shows us the great spiritual danger of wealth, why greed is an idol, a false god. To buy into the lie that our life consists in the abundance of possessions is in the end to be turned in on the self. And that closes us off and cuts us off from God and from those around us. Our possessions can become the bars of the prison of the self. Did you notice how the rich fool is alone? I take it that he didn't pull down his barns with his own hands - he had people working for him. But they are just tools for his use, not people to befriend. The only person he talks to is himself. But no matter how much we are closed off from others, we are always addressed by God. And one day all the things we've blocked our ears with will be removed and we will hear his voice. And so Jesus warns us now, before they are stripped away, will we hear? Will we be rich towards God?

Rich towards God

What might that look like?

Jesus tells us in the next verses.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. ... 29 And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. 30 For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

How can we be rich towards God? Trust him. Did you notice that even the rich man's wealth was the gift of God? Who was it that made his ground yield an abundant harvest? Don't look to wealth for security. It's God who cares for you. Don't put your hope in wealth. It's God who provides everything for your enjoyment. Seek first his kingdom.

But greed is such a powerful false god that Jesus gives us a radical solution to shake us free from its tentacles. Faced with an abundant harvest the rich man asks *What shall I do?* We too, whom God has abundantly blessed, are faced with that question - what shall I do? The rich man was blind to those around him. But Jesus says to us,

32 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor. 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. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

What are we to do with any abundance that God has given us? Give to the poor. This is how we can be rich towards God. Proverbs 14:31 says

*He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.*

God you see has special concern for the poor. If we are to honour him we are to care for the poor. Proverbs 28.27 says

*He who gives to the poor will lack nothing,
but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.*

What shall I do? Faced with an abundant harvest the rich man closed his eyes to the poor. His heart was snared by his wealth, closed in on itself, just like his tight fist, clinging to his money. And that is the temptation for us. Jesus' antidote is radical generosity: Sell your possessions and give to the poor. That's how to shake free of the tentacles of greed.

It's what St Paul tells Timothy to teach the rich.

17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Just to press the point a little more, Jesus' teaching should change how we see possessions. All that we have is given by God in order to provide for the needs of others. Thomas Aquinas put it like this:

Man ought to possess external things, not as his own, but as common, so that, namely, he is ready to communicate them to others in their need.

That is, we do not possess things absolutely, because all things belong to God. We hold things only as stewards, in order to meet the needs of others. My mum was perfectly right to give some of my cars to the friend who had none. We can be generous because God will provide for us. But all of this is very hard. What can change our hearts so that we become generous and willing to share?

The Secret - Divine Generosity

Well I promised to let you in on a secret. Did you notice those words in Psalm 49?

No one can redeem the life of another
or give to God a ransom for them –
8 the ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough –
9 so that they should live on for ever
and not see decay.

You see there was one who possessed all the riches of heaven. But he gave these up to pay the ransom for your life and my life with the only payment that was enough - his own life. On the cross Jesus paid the ransom for your life and my life so that we might live forever and not see decay. His life was demanded for us who are poor and destitute and thoroughly undeserving so that we might receive all that he has prepared for us - the riches of glory. And if God has provided this ransom, how will he not generously provide us with all things? So you and I can trust him and be generous with what he gives us, even as Jesus is infinitely generous to us.