

## *Beware of Covetousness*<sup>1</sup> (Parable of the Rich Fool)

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 12:13-31

The parables of Jesus are just as applicable today as they were when originally given. The parable that has come to be called that of the “rich fool” is especially relevant for these materialistic times.

The parable was given while Jesus was teaching his disciples. He had previously rebuked the Pharisees for their hypocrisy (Luke 11:39-52). The Pharisees and scribes then tried to provoke Jesus into saying something by which they could entrap him (11:53-54). The multitudes around Jesus were innumerable “insomuch as they trod upon one another”(12:1). Jesus proceeded to give some instructions specifically to his disciples, which was no doubt overheard by the multitude. Then unexpectedly, from the crowd, someone exclaimed, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

Who was this one who dared interrupt the master while he was teaching his disciples? He apparently was not concerned about Jesus and his disciples, nor was he concerned about whatever Jesus may have been teaching the crowd. He seems not to have been concerned about having a good relationship with his brother. His concern was for himself. He was concerned only about having a part of his brother’s estate. Could this have been someone like the younger brother in the parable of the prodigal son, whose loving father may have died, and whose older brother was unsympathetic toward him? Whatever his case may have been, Jesus realized that he was covetous.

Jesus therefore said two things. First, he said to the man who had interrupted him, “Man, who made me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” This statement indicates that if a man has a legal dispute he should go to the judge or legal arbitrator for its resolution. There are courts of law to deal with such matters. Let those who have grievances take their cases to the proper authorities. Jesus response is an example for those of us who teach God's word. While we may declare the teachings of God, even accurately, we have no authority to be judges in human disputes over which we have not jurisdiction.

Second, to the multitude Jesus said, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.” Ours is a world in quest of material things. Our society generally measures a person’s success or failure in life by his or her material possessions and luxurious lifestyle. This practice assumes that humanity is only physical. It fails to realize that humanity is also spiritual and that the spiritual nature of humanity is more significant than the physical. The idea that human beings are spiritual as well as physical was also behind Jesus’ answer to Satan when he was tempted by Satan to turn stones into bread. Jesus had answered, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3).

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We sometimes need to be reminded that “a man’s life consists not in the abundance of the things he possesses. I well remember that as a young preacher, I was asked to perform a wedding in the home of a poor farmer in northern Arkansas. As his daughter was about to leave home, he commented to me that in all his lifetime he had never been able to accumulate very much. I got the impression from his statement that he considered himself a failure. But he was a good Christian man and had a good Christian wife. They had a lovely Christian daughter. They were hospitable and caring folks. His comment reflected the sentiments of too many in our world.

Having cautioned the crowd about being covetous, Jesus then spoke a parable to them saying, “The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?’ So he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’” (Luke 12:16-20).

The rich man's problem was not in making a crop, but rather in having, as he said, “no room to store my crops.” The rich man's solution was to pull down his barns and build greater barns for storage of crops and other goods. I once wondered why a man would tear down his barns. Why not just build additional barns? I later learned that in that country, barns were holes in the ground which stored one’s harvest. That being the case, the simplest thing to do is to tear down the walls of empty holes in the ground, remove the excess dirt, and thus build bigger barns. With more storage space, the rich man thought that he could take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry.

Isn’t that the same way many people think today? Is that the way you think? In our commercial society, advertisers seem to program us to think that if only we can buy this particular product we’ll be happy. If only we can have a new house, or a new car, or even a new suit of clothes, we’ll be happy. A soft drink company advertises, “Be happy, drink Squirt.” But, do things really make us happy? Is not such thinking the same as the rich man’s assumption. Do we assume, as he did, that life is only physical, that life is only temporal, and that, for us anyway, death is still a long, long way off?

The fact is that just the opposite is true. Happiness comes in giving, not in getting. The apostle Paul called upon believers to “remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35). The rich man had abundant opportunity to give to others. The time when Jesus lived seems to have been a time of what we would call an economic depression. Crowds were available to hear the teachings of Jesus partially because many of them were without work.

The rich man’s problem was not what he thought it was. He thought his problem was that he did not have sufficient storage space. Jesus indicated that the rich man’s real problem was that of covetousness. Covetousness keeps many people separated from happiness.

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Now, let's be sure we know what covetousness means. Covetousness may be either good or bad, but generally, it is used in scripture in a bad sense. In a good sense, covetousness is to desire or wish for, with eagerness, to desire earnestly. An example of this use of "covet" is found in 1 Corinthians 12:31, "Covet earnestly the best gifts." However, "covet" is generally used in a bad sense. As such, it means to desire inordinately, to long for that which is unlawful to obtain or possess. An example of this use of "covet" is found in Exodus 20:17, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's." (See also Deuteronomy 5:21.)

In a general sense, covetousness is "all inordinate desire of worldly possession, such as undue thirst for honors, gold, etc." In a more restricted sense, "it is the desire of increasing one's substance by appropriating that of others. It is a disorder of the heart, and closely allied to selfishness." It is "a strong sometimes irresistible desire of possessing or of increasing one's possessions." The Bible uses the term 'covetousness' almost exclusively to portray that which is of inordinate desire.

The New Testaments strongly forbids covetousness. Covetousness is inappropriate for Christians. Paul wrote, "but fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints" (Ephesians 5:3). He also placed covetousness on equality with sexual immorality, idolatry, reviling, drunkards, and extortioners, saying that believers should "not keep company with anyone named a brother" who does such, "not even to eat with such a person" (1 Corinthians 5:11). And the Apostle John declares, "Do not love the world or the things in the world" (1 John 2:15).

The parable of the rich fool reveals that covetousness is selfishness. The rich man used the pronoun "I" six times and the pronoun "my" five times. No one else is even mentioned. The covetous are described by Isaiah, "Yes, they are greedy dogs which never have enough. And they are shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, every one for his own gain, from his own territory" (Isaiah 56:11).

The parable of the rich fool reveals that covetousness is deceitful. Ownership of goods deceived him into thinking that he owned time also. He thought to command his soul in such a way as to show that he forgot that God could demand his soul at any moment.

The parable of the rich fool reveals that covetousness is faithlessness. The writer to the Hebrews implied that covetousness is the opposite of faith when he admonished, "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For he himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5).

The parable of the rich fool reveals that covetousness is foolishness. It is foolish because covetousness does not satisfy. The rich fool thought to satisfy the hunger of the soul with the food of the body. However, Ecclesiastes 5:10 declares that "he who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase." Moreover, covetousness is foolish because it serves no purpose. To the rich man, God said, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" (Luke 12:20). The writer of Proverbs said, "Do not overwork to be rich; because

of your own understanding, cease! Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away like an eagle toward heaven” (Proverbs 23:4-5).

Many consequences come to the covetous. Psalms 10:3 declares that “the wicked ... blesses the greedy and renounces the LORD.” Proverbs 1:19 indicates that greediness “takes away the life of its owners.” Covetousness is mentioned by Jesus as one of those evil things which “come from within and defile a man” (Mark 7:21-23). Covetousness destroys fellowship among brethren, since Christians are not even to eat with a brother who is covetous (1 Corinthians 5:11). The Apostle Paul declared that “no...covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Ephesians 5:5). He also indicated that because of the love of money, which is the root of all kinds of evil, “some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” (1 Timothy 6:10). These consequences of covetousness should give us pause to examine whether we might have a covetous spirit.

When Jesus concluded his parable of the rich fool, he said, “So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). The opposite of laying up treasure for oneself is to be rich toward God. Jesus taught, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

And how do we be rich toward God? Jesus himself gave the answer in the parable of the sheep and the goats. In that parable about the judgment, Jesus portrayed those who had given food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, lodging to the stranger, clothing to the naked, and assistance to the sick and the imprisoned as having given those things to him. (Matthew 24:35-40). That’s what it means to be rich toward God. Similarly, the apostle Paul was involved in collecting funds for the poor brethren in Judea when he wrote to the Corinthians, saying, “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come” (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

When we are rich toward God, we believe that our giving does not hurt us, rather it blesses us. Jesus said, “Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38). When we are rich toward God, we believe Jesus when he said that “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). We are willing to be rich toward God when we believe that “he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

When we look to the scriptures we can find examples of those who were covetous as well as those who were generous. In the Old Testament we remember those for whom the love of money was their downfall. Any list of such persons would surely include Cain, Lot, Balaam, Achan, and Gehazi. In the New Testament we would

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probably include the rich young ruler, Judas, Ananias and Sapphira, Felix, and Demas. On the other hand, were we to name from the Old Testament those who were generous and who did not manifest a covetous spirit, we might think immediately of Abel, Abraham, Moses and King David. And in the New Testament we would likely think of the good Samaritan and of Barnabas, but especially of the apostles who left all to follow Jesus. If we look to classical literature, we might think of the covetousness of Scrooge in Charles Dicken's *Christmas Story* and of George Eliot's *Silas Mariner*.

We call attention to these personalities because we want to ask where each of us might place ourselves among them. Would our friends categorize us as covetous? Or would they think we are generous? More important than what our friends think, however, is what God thinks. Would he think us foolish like the man in Jesus' parable? Or would he think us faithful because we have been generous with the resources he has given us? Don't let your inheritance, or any other resources of life, divide you from your family or from God. Covetousness brings only sorrow. Be big enough to love others with what you have, rather than hate others because they have what you want.