

Luke 12:13-21

“Be Rich Toward God”

¹³ Now someone ^[j] in the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the *family* inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ But He said to him, “[k] You there—who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over *the two of you?*” ¹⁵ But He said to them, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not *even* when one is affluent does his life consist of his possessions.” ¹⁶ And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. ¹⁷ And he began thinking to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘This *is what* I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and I will store all my grain and my goods there. ¹⁹ And I will say to ^[l] myself, “You have many goods stored up for many years *to come*; relax, eat, drink, *and enjoy yourself!*” ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This *very* night ^[m] your soul is demanded of you; and *as for all* that you have prepared, who will own *it now?*’ ²¹ Such is the one who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich in relation to God.”

Do you have a favorite possession? I mean something that you just absolutely love owning. Take note that I am not asking about what (is) the most important thing in your life (is). You might say that your family or your faith is the most important thing in your life. That is not what I am asking about. I want you to think of the thing that is your favorite possession. There are a few things that are really special to me. For example I have some books (of virtually no earthly value) that I just am proud to own, and I really love my noise cancelling headphones. These things are special to me because of the things they make me feel or help me be able to do. What about you? What are some of your favorite things? Now...if you lost that thing, how would you feel? Losing my favorite things would be frustrating, but probably not completely life altering. If your favorite things were lost or broken, would you replace them right away? Would you mourn their loss for a time? I think for most people losing their favorite possessions would be a frustrating experience, but not something that would ruin more than a day or two of their lives. In fact the things that most of us love the most are the superficial things; things that have sentimental value or make our lives more efficient. It is not likely that our favorite possessions are matters of life and death.

However, if we are honest, some of us really struggle with comparing ourselves to others based on how much stuff (possessions, things) we have. When we see what other people have we aren't happy for them, we just want to have the same kinds of things they have. It seems like other people (those who have more than us) are happier. I wonder if this is what the man in the crowd who called out to Jesus was thinking. Maybe he was thinking his life would be better if his brother split the inheritance with him. Maybe he thought life would be much more relaxed and easier if he just had more resources at his disposal.

When I read Jesus' response I think it is a bit shocking and a little humorous. More than shocking and humorous though I see that Jesus' response cuts right to the heart of this man and to all of us. In the midst of all the concerns for this life, Jesus refocused attention on the most valuable thing of all: being rich toward God. The words “rich toward God” come in the last verse of our Scripture passage today, but you can see that Jesus is drawing his listeners' attention (and our attention too) to heavenly realities rather than earthly concerns.

In our time this morning I want us to answer the question about what it means to be rich toward God. I want us all to see that the most important investments we make in life should not be monetary, but eternal, heavenly investments in godliness. Let's give our attention to the words of Luke 12:13-21 now.

1. "Life is not about getting as much as possible."(v. 13-15)

In Luke 11-12, Jesus has been interacting with the religious leaders in Israel and teaching his disciples and the crowds gathered around him. It is a relatively heated set of episodes in the life of Jesus. Jesus calls this generation of Israel an "evil generation" for asking for a sign (Luke 11:29). He warns his disciples about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He even gives "woes" to the Pharisees in Luke 11:42-44. A woe is something between a warning and a curse. Then Jesus gives a measure of encouragement to the crowds and his disciples when he says to them have no fear of those who can only kill the body, but don't have the power to kill the soul in Luke 12:4-7. On the surface this isn't much of an encouragement. However, Jesus clarifies his meaning by saying that in God's eyes we all have great value so don't fear those that don't really have ultimate power over us to control what we do. In the midst of these teachings and some others, a man in the crowd asks Jesus to judge between him and his brother concerning their inheritance. Now in the time of Jesus we can probably assume this man wasn't simply asking that Jesus make his brother give him some money. It might have been part of the family land, business, or some other tangible resource. Coin money was common under Roman rule, but inheritances were more often less tangible things that needed to be converted into money. Since we don't have all the details of this situation we can only speculate as to the manner of this request.

Was the man in the crowd being completely serious, was he trying to test Jesus, or was he joking in some way? We simply don't know, but Jesus refuses to answer his question. Instead Jesus responds, "Who made me the judge between you and your brother?" I think this is a funny question for at least two reasons. First, Jesus is truly the judge of the world. When we take the Lord's Supper we are reaffirming our belief that Jesus is coming back to judge the world. But when Jesus came the first time to the world he did not come to judge between brothers in inheritance matters. Jesus was sent to the world to redeem the world (John 3:16-17). Another reason this question is funny is that Jesus would have known better than any judge or arbitrator what was going on in the hearts of these brothers. He would have known completely what was at stake and what motivated each one. There would have been no better judge, but he was refusing to get involved. However, we do see that Jesus does indeed deal with the heart of this brother in verse 15.

Jesus says to him, ¹⁵ "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

We must see Jesus' warning as his insight into the heart of this man. The man asks for some help in getting some of the inheritance and Jesus warns him not to let covetousness into his heart. In this way we can see Jesus is not completely refusing to get involved in judging the matter of the inheritance, but it is not in an expected way. He warns the man to be on guard against all forms of covetousness.

Covetousness is a serious sin in the pages of Scripture, but what is it? In Exodus 20:17, the LORD gives the people this commandment concerning coveting,

Exodus 20:17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

Most Bible dictionaries define covetousness as a strong desire for someone else's possessions. This strong desire to make your neighbor's possessions your own is destructive for many reasons. For example, Jesus says that covetousness comes from within a person and defiles from the inside in Mark 7:20-22. Proverbs 15:27 says that greedy desires can lead a person to ungodly methods of getting what you want, which can bring shame on an entire household.

Coveting is serious, but with the advent of paper currency and mass production covetousness has ways of going unseen. There was a time when you would see your neighbor with something and you knew that it took time and perhaps skill to get what they have. Now it is different. When you see something that a person has you know that all you need to do is find out where to buy it, and it can be yours. In this sense seeing a shiny, new something and wanting something like it is not coveting. You might not have even known that you wanted something like that, but when you saw it you thought, "it would be so nice to have one." It is unlikely that you would make plans to steal them or find some way to make the current owner of the shoes give them to you. The strong desire for someone else's possessions has not really changed even if the manufacturing methods have changed. It's the craving for more and more. At the heart of covetousness is a mindset of seeking satisfaction from having the same things as everyone else. God says you shall not covet your neighbor's house, but follows that up with an explanation about not coveting your neighbor's wife. As much as the commandment about coveting is about material possessions it is also about desiring to be like someone else; to have what they have, to do what they do. Jesus tells the man life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions whether that be your bank account balance, expensive goods, or your position in society. At this point Jesus has only given the man a warning, but as Jesus continues he gives them a parable to consider the deeper or truer purpose of life.

2. "The Parable of the Rich Fool."(v.16-21)

Jesus often used parables to teach the crowds. A parable is a short, simple story that serves as an analogy for a greater spiritual truth. While the material parts of every parable are easy to understand, sometimes the spiritual truth is a bit obscure or difficult to discern. This can be because we don't deal with the same problems or use the same kinds of everyday things that Jesus' listeners knew. For example, parables dealing with wineskins are foreign to most of us because we don't really use wineskins anymore. Jesus also taught in parables to obscure the spiritual truths in his teaching. Jesus quoted from the Old Testament in Matt 13:14, ¹⁴....."You will indeed hear but never understand..." Some of the parables have their interpretation included in the text. This is what we see in Luke 12:16-21. The interaction between Jesus and the man who wants his brother to split the inheritance with him serves as the basis for Jesus's teaching, and the final verse in our text this morning brings the truth home to us.

"The land of a rich man produced plentifully...." Here we have a story of a rich man getting richer. He had so much produce that he literally could not put anymore into his barns. He had to figure out what to do with his surplus. His decision seems like a reasonable one. Build bigger barns. I am not much of a farmer, but I assume that in times of prosperity you want to be able to expand your operation. I think we might be tempted to be jealous or judgmental of this rich man. When the rich get richer it just seems like they ought to help out those less fortunate. Maybe you think when reading this passage that this rich man could have donated his surplus to the poor or even sold it all very cheaply to help other people. I wonder how different a generous rich man would be perceived. But in the parable we are not told much about the rich man's character. We are just told that he had a plentiful harvest and he wanted to build bigger barns. I think we can understand the impulse to grow a business bigger and better. Protecting your profits and expansion are basic business principles. This very short parable doesn't give us a lot of details, but I think we can say that in Luke 12:16-19, the rich man's sin was not a lack of generosity.

His problem was that he was satisfied with his possessions. He said to his soul (which I think is very significant in understanding this parable), "I have everything that I need." His internal dialogue, as revealed by our Lord Jesus, is showing us that he thought that he did not need anything else than what he had. He was acting like having a lot of stuff was enough to preserve his life and meet all his needs. He was speaking as his own authority on matters of life and death and the future. This is a graphic description of

covetousness. The rich man has completely forgotten all of the important things in life. He has forgotten that he cannot lengthen his life nor in truth shorten it. He cannot determine from one year to another what his crops will do. A storm or a drought would completely destroy all his harvest. He is literally one disaster away from being a poor man, but here he is thinking that he has all the power because he has a lot of wealth. All the wealth in the world cannot avert disaster. A rich person can buy expensive things, go on long vacations, and live in comfort. But a rich person cannot prevent their death despite their best efforts. The rich man in the parable says his wealth entitles him to rest, food and drink, and happiness. All that he has built will endure therefore he will too. But God speaks to this man and calls him "Fool." God tells the man he is a fool because he said to his soul, "you have ample good laid up for many years." The rich man is missing an essential part of his life. While he looks at what is around him and feels satisfied he is neglecting the fact that he is not his own. He does not own his own life. He cannot lengthen his days. The same is true for us. We did not have any say over where we were born and we cannot change the fact that one day we will die.

If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, how would you spend your last 24hrs? I have heard people say that they would go all out having as many enjoyable experiences as they could. They would do as much living as they could for the next 24 hours so they could die without regrets. In this parable, the Lord Jesus is drawing our attention to what a meaningful life really is all about. It is not about an abundance of material possessions or getting as much out of life as possible. Whether we will live for 30yrs, 60yrs, 90yrs, or more does not matter because one day all that we have accumulated will be distributed to others and it will not help us because we will all pass from life to death. God said to the rich man,

"this night your soul is required of you, and the things that you have prepared, whose will they be?"(v.20)Our duty then is to live for something truer, something higher. What is the higher and truer thing that we should strive to live for? Jesus says in verse 21, it is "being rich toward God."

At the heart of understanding what it means to be "rich toward God" is the truth that God is more valuable than any amount of wealth. If you had the choice between knowledge of God or a large sum of money, what would you choose? Yes, money is valuable for today, but all the money in the world will not give you eternal life. Japanese custom is to cremate bodies after death. Even in the most elaborate urn you cannot fit much of the accumulated wealth of a lifetime. Death is the great equalizer between those with power and wealth and the rest of us. Having earthly goods (even a lot of them) is not a bad thing in and of itself. It is what we live for that really matters. Do you ever look around and think, I really wish I had what my neighbors have? Would I be happier if I had more money or more possessions?

Covetousness is a sneaky sin. It can be an obvious thing or it can be hidden deep in our hearts. In children it is often very obvious. A child sees another child with a toy and they fight over who will play with it. Adults are different. We are quite good at hiding our feelings. We can see the success of others and their possessions, and feel a strong desire to be like them. We want to have what they have. We usually do nothing, but we feel the tension. Jesus has something to say to us about how we fight this temptation. He continues his teaching in the next section of Luke 12. He tells the disciples that God takes care of the natural world so he will take care of them. He goes on to say, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." It may not be easy to do, but I urge you to consider where your treasure is. What are you living for? Are you living for the approval of others or perhaps living in fear of their judgment? Are you dreaming of expensive vacations and a relaxing retirement? Do you just want some of the finer things of life? Do you see yourself growing in generosity or are you having a harder time letting go of your money and time? "Being rich toward God" means that we are aware of the heavenly realities of eternity and the gospel of Jesus. We see and value the things of God because we see how precious those things are compared to the things that many of our neighbors are striving for. We must not think that this world is useless or of no value. God has given us a life to live. We can have joy here on earth, but our joy should be deeper because of the bigger and better things that are laid up for us in Christ Jesus.

Now life can be difficult for anyone. Moreover, we are not guaranteed an easy life as Christians, and perhaps because you became a Christian some things have gotten even more difficult for you. The daily routine of work and responsibility can seem overwhelming. However, the Christian has a treasure secured in heaven. It is not gold or silver. Have you ever read the book of Revelation? The road is paved in gold. The sea is like a crystal. There are jewels all over the place. Now on the one hand it makes it sound like a tremendous life of luxury awaits the Christian, but I think it is really just saying that all the stuff that seems so valuable now will be nothing but the ground under our feet in heaven. The real treasure is being able to be adopted into God's family through Jesus (Gal 3:23-4:7) and to be welcomed at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:6-10). After redeeming a people for his own possession, Jesus ascended into heaven. We await his return. While we await his return we serve him on earth. This too is a treasure only Christians get to enjoy.

If you do not know if you are a Christian, have never been baptized, or are not sure what to think about the Christian faith, please come and talk to me after the service or speak to a member of this church. They will either help you or find someone who can help you.

Dear Christian, give your attention to the things of God. Do not grow weary in doing good. Be constant in prayer. Serve the Lord. Tell the world of the wonders of his glorious grace. Keep your eyes on Jesus.