

Luke 12:13-21
The Wealthy Fool

We cannot separate our faith from the daily routine matters of our lives. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the way we handle the resources God has given us. Two examples from Scripture immediately come to mind. The first is Zaccheus. When confronted by Jesus, this wealthy tax collector, who had made his money extorting the last drop of subsistence from those unfortunate enough to be in his power, was convicted of his sins and “said to the Lord, ‘behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much’” (Luke 19:8). Jesus, no doubt rejoicing at the conversion He had witnessed responded, “today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9).

On the other hand, a wealthy, young man asked Jesus what he must do to be saved. He had it all. Youth wealth, and power. He had been faithful to the Jewish law. He presumed his salvation was secure. Jesus told him, “if you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matthew 19:21). Tragically, the man did not respond as we would hope. It was too much to ask, apparently, for “when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property” (Matthew 19:22).

Jesus summed up the basic principle when He said “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34). We simply cannot separate our faith from our finances, and fortunately for those who want to be obedient in this area, the Bible has much to say about wealth.

To begin, the Bible does not condemn wealth. In fact, many of the great saints of God were blessed with significant wealth. It is no sin to be rich. Think of:

Job - “His possessions also were 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and very many servants; and that man was the greatest of all the men of the east” (Job 1:3).

Abraham - “Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold” (Genesis 13:2).

Boaz - “Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz” (Ruth 2:1).

Solomon - “So King Solomon became greater than all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom” (1 Kings 10:23).

Joseph of Arimathea - “When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus” (Matthew 27:57).

Clearly, God has no objection to people merely for their being wealthy. After all, He is responsible for their wealth. Still, the Bible does remind us about the place riches can take in our lives. “The love of money is a root of all sorts of evil” because “some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith” (1 Timothy 6:10). The challenge faced by those with wealth is that it can cloud our judgment and lead to a confidence rooted in something other than God’s grace. That is why the Bible warns “those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God” (1 Timothy 6:17).

Again the Scriptures give us a plethora of examples.

Achan - “²⁰So Achan answered Joshua and said, ‘truly, I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: ²¹when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then I coveted them and took them; and behold, they are concealed in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath it’” (Joshua 7:20-21).

Delilah - “The lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, ‘entice him, and see where his great strength lies and how we may overpower him that we may bind him to afflict him. Then we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver’” (Judges 16:5).

Judas - “¹⁴Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, ‘what are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?’ And they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him” (Matthew 26:14-15).

Ananias and Sapphira - “¹But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ²and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 5:1-2).

The fundamental problem with loving wealth is that it has the potential to lead us into pride. We believe ourselves to be self-sufficient, and therefore not in need of God. It was the warning the Israelites received as they were about to enter the land of Canaan:

“¹¹Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; ¹²otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, ¹³and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, ¹⁴then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Deuteronomy 8:11-14).

And it is true of the passage we will study today.

The Request

Jesus had just talked about God’s great care for believers. One would think that upon hearing that the Holy Spirit would be with them in their times of greatest trial, those listening would be encouraged and respond with an acclamation of praise. It was not so. As Jesus was teaching, He was interrupted. “Someone in the crowd said to Him, ‘teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me’” (v. 13). Imagine that, if you can. The Messiah is addressing the crowd about the kingdom of God, and this man was bold enough (some might say rude enough) to stop Jesus and have Him take up a personal matter between himself and his brother.

The man could only have been motivated by greed. The desire for money burned so fervently within him that he did not even do Jesus the courtesy of waiting until He had finished speaking. No doubt the man could have sat through the teaching and then talked to Jesus privately afterwards.

Why did the man approach Jesus in the first place? Perhaps because Jesus was a rabbi (the man addresses Jesus as ‘teacher’), and rabbis often settled such matters. Perhaps the man was hoping to use the popularity of Jesus with the masses to influence and manipulate his brother. It seems from the nature of the request that his brother was present as well, and the man expected Jesus to set his brother straight right then concerning the inheritance. Notice also that it does not appear that the man was making a case to

Jesus; he was not asking Jesus to arbitrate between rival claims to the fortune. He was simply asking for a judgment in his favor based on his word alone.

The Jewish people had laws for inheritance.

“¹⁵If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, ¹⁶then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn. ¹⁷But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn” (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

“⁸Further, you shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter. ⁹If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. ¹⁰If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. ¹¹If his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his nearest relative in his own family, and he shall possess it; and it shall be a statutory ordinance to the sons of Israel, just as the Lord commanded Moses” (Numbers 27:8-11).

The Law was available to those who cared to follow it. Of course there were areas of some doubt, but one does not get the expression that the man had a general grievance, but rather that he simply wanted all the money.

The Response

Jesus did not take the bait. He declined to get involved and intervene in an area that would only offend one of the two brothers, and others besides. Instead He responded coolly to the man by replying, “man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?” (v. 14). The word ‘man’ itself indicates a more formal address one would make to strangers. It was definitely not a term of endearment. A modern equivalent might be “sir” to someone we do not know. It was respectful, but nothing more.

Jesus had two very good reasons for not becoming involved. First, there were local religious and political authorities whose job it was to mediate such disputes, and Jesus had no reason to seem to be usurping their authority and thereby give them further reasons to move against Him. Second, and more importantly, this was not why Jesus had come. He was not here to solve social inequalities or regulate dysfunctional families. His was not the gospel of wealth. He had come for a greater purpose, “the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). So He took advantage of the situation to teach.

Jesus spoke to the crowd. As He often did, Jesus took a particular moment or event, and drew from it a larger, more eternal meaning. He did not get flustered at the interruption, but seamlessly continued His talk to the people incorporating the man's foolish request into His lesson. The man must have turned red-faced when he heard in response to his request for Jesus to intervene “beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions” (v. 15). He had asked for help gaining wealth and become an object lesson to the crowd.

Jesus did not go easy. The word ‘beware’ is a command. It is an alarm. It acknowledged the destructive power of greed. And the word for ‘greed’ is equally illustrative of Jesus’ point. We can substitute the word ‘covet’ if you like. It means a grasping beyond one’s reach. Think of having an unquenchable thirst. True greed can never be satisfied. As the wealthy-beyond-imagination King Solomon said, “he who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income” (Ecclesiastes 5:10).

John D. Rockefeller comes to mind. Rockefeller, the founder of the Standard Oil Company wanted to do two things in his life. He wanted to make \$100,000, and he wanted to live to be 100 years old. He died at the age of 98, not quite achieving the first of his objectives. However, the Standard Oil Company at one point controlled over ninety percent of the oil resources of the United States. Due to his keen (and sometimes ruthless) business sense, when Rockefeller died during the worst of the Great Depression in 1937, he was worth an estimated \$1.4 billion. If we consider his wealth in terms of the national wealth of the time, it translates into about \$340 billion in today’s terms. To give a perspective on that amount of money, it means if Rockefeller were alive today, he could give \$1000 to every man, woman, and child living in the U. S. and still have enough money left to spend \$1 million dollars a day, every day, for the next 37 years. Yet, despite this unimaginable wealth, when a journalist interviewed Rockefeller in his retirement and asked him how much money was enough, Rockefeller responded, “just a little bit more.”

Greed, or covetousness, is a great sin. It was the sin of Satan. It was the sin of Adam. And we must remember that greed comes in many forms. It can be money or power or prestige or attention. Fundamentally, it is wanting what we do not have, even when we have enough. That was the point Jesus made when He said “not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions” (v. 15). Abundance is more than we need. It is excess. And the point Jesus was making was that even if we had more than we needed, if we are greedy, we will never be satisfied.

Theologically, to want what we do not have is doubt is to cast doubt on the sovereignty and providence of God. “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5). God has a perfect plan for our lives, and we must remember that if we are centered that will, we have exactly what God wants us to have. If we are not rich, it is because God knows what is best for us. After all, the true character of a person is not seen best when they are suffering, but when they are succeeding.

The Story

Jesus then elaborated on His point with a story. It was another of His homey anecdotes that illustrated His main point. In this edition, “the land of a rich man was very productive” (v. 16). Again we are reminded that there is nothing wrong with being rich. Jesus is not speaking about wealth. Jesus has no special condemnation for the man because he was wealthy.

And the man was indeed wealthy. He had reaped such a bountiful harvest that “he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘what shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’” (v. 17). He had enjoyed a bumper crop. His biggest problem was that he had no place to store it all. In other words, his wallet wasn’t big enough to hold all his money! Pondering his options the man determined “this is what I will

do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods” (v. 18). That was his solution - to store all his wealth and be able to live off it for a long time. I will be self-sufficient the man thought. Finally I will be able to enjoy the good life, “I will say to my soul, ‘soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry’” (v. 19).

An excellent barometer of this man's heart is to see how frequently the words ‘I’ and ‘my’ are used. He was focus only on himself. The criteria for his decision making was entirely how it would effect him. There were many other options open to him. He could have used the abundance of his harvest to feed the poor. He could have shared what he had. But instead he kept it all to himself. Why? He certainly could not eat it all himself. I think his plan was to not flood the market with his produce and thereby drive up the price. That way, when he did sell, he would make a greater profit and be able to live off the proceeds for a considerable time.

As a farmer, he should have been well aware of the many factors beyond his control. The weather, birds and insects, and crop disease were all things that could have destroyed his bountiful harvest and there was nothing he could have done about it. He could not make it rain. He could not keep away the frost. Instead of thanking God for what He had done, he simply assumed that he was able to control events now that he had an abundant harvest. He was wrong.

The man had no control whatsoever. He must have been shocked when “God said to him, ‘you fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’” (v. 20). Again Jesus does not mince His words. A ‘fool’ implied not just someone who was ignorant, but someone incapable of knowledge or truth. We are reminded of Psalm 14:1,
“The fool has said in his heart, “there is no God.”

It was God who controlled his harvest, as well as his life. On Him he ought to have depended, but his bounty had made him think he was self-sufficient and forgetful of his God.

“¹³Come now, you who say, ‘today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ ¹⁴Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, ‘if the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’ ¹⁶But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil” (James 4:13-16).

Let our prayer be,

“⁴Lord, make me to know my end
And what is the extent of my days;
Let me know how transient I am.

⁵Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths,

And my lifetime as nothing in Your sight;
Surely every man at his best is a mere breath. Selah.
“Surely every man walks about as a phantom;
Surely they make an uproar for nothing;
He amasses riches and does not know who will gather them” (Psalm 39:4-6).

The Point

Jesus concluded by providing the application Himself. “So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (v. 21). He had said as much before, “¹⁹do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal” (Matthew 6:19-20).

Let us be sure we understand the point Jesus was making. He spoke, as always, in the context of Scripture. No doubt the man had worked diligently to plow and prepare his fields, weed and water the crops, and harvest the product when ripened. He had worked hard. He had followed the wisdom he knew. “Go to the ant, O sluggard; Observe her ways and be wise” (Proverbs 6:6). The man was not condemned for his work ethic.

He also was not condemned for his foresight. It was no sin to plan. We can remember Joseph planning to keep the people of Egypt fed during the years of drought.

“³⁴Let Pharaoh take action to appoint overseers in charge of the land, and let him exact a fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven years of abundance. ³⁵Then let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and store up the grain for food in the cities under Pharaoh’s authority, and let them guard it. ³⁶Let the food become as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish during the famine” (Genesis 41:34-36).

The man was condemned because he did not put God first. “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). He had forgotten that all things, including ourselves are God’s. “You belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God” (1 Corinthians 3:23). His motive had been his own well being, not serving God or seeking His will. “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Take Aways

May we praise God for what we have, and prayerfully consider how to be good stewards of our many blessings.