

**Luke 12:13–21**

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ 14But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ 15And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ 16Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” 18Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” 20But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” 21So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sometimes it is surprising what people will ask a pastor. Most pastors field their fair share of biblical and theological questions. Once in a great while I will even have someone come to me with a follow-up question about something in a sermon, which is awesome, by the way. Those are the kinds of pastoral inquiries one would expect. Once in a while, though, pastors get asked for advice on matters about which they don’t know a whole lot more than the next person. As most of us pastors would probably confess, when such unusual requests get made, you feel ill-equipped to say or do anything (unless you just want to fake it!). I have through my life experience become a bit of a Jack of All Trades. The problem with this is that I usually know just enough about a lot of topics to get myself into trouble.

Anyway; this situation happened to Jesus in today’s scripture. A stranger approaches Jesus with a practical matter involving a family legal argument. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!” It’s not even a question, is it? This is a demand, and Jesus seems a bit upset about it. “Mister,” Jesus says, “I don’t know who you are or what you’re talking about! I am not a judge and have no authority here at all.” It was a curt retort.

But you can’t really blame Jesus. After all, this section in Luke’s gospel contains some of Jesus’s most spiritual advice; quotes that are like Matthew’s sermon on the mount. The whole idea of love your neighbor, and help other people, and all that good stuff.

So Jesus is talking about how we are to take care of others, and this guy jumps up and tells Jesus to tell his brother to give him money. According to Jewish law the oldest brother was to receive two thirds of the land and money as inheritance. The next oldest brother was to receive the other third. Neither Jesus, nor us, know anything about this man’s situation. How is Jesus supposed to respond to that? Also, there is the fact that Jesus isn’t a lawyer, a scribe, or a judge. It would be like someone standing up in the middle of one of my sermons and asking me to fix their computer for them.

The only explanation for someone’s making such an intrusion is that this person is preoccupied with money. This stranger had not really been listening to Jesus at all but had been thinking about his financial woes. I might give this man the benefit of the doubt and we could say he is thinking that his brother should be more loving and give him his due, but even then, he is missing the point a bit. It’s not about what we should be receiving, it’s about what we should

be giving. Jesus was not pleased at this interruption, but he recognized what was going on, and so immediately offers some warnings about greed.

What's more, Jesus uses the occasion to offer up a very brief parable. But when you think about it, this is a rather unusual parable. Most of Jesus' parables illustrate some aspect of the kingdom, of grace, of salvation. This parable, however, is more generic. In fact, the main and only character of the parable does not have any obvious connection to anything spiritual whatsoever. He looks to be a secular figure in every way.

But it is precisely this secular atmosphere and the complete isolation of this rich man that delivers this parable's punch. This man is completely out there on his own, doing his own thing with no reference to anything or anyone else. He is, Jesus says pointedly, a "fool."

Now days we don't often go around calling other people fools, at least not to their face. Although I have seen folks use the term, or something similar when arguing on Facebook. Biblically speaking, "fool" is a powerful word that plays not an individual note on the larger biblical keyboard but in fact whole chords. In the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament a fool was anyone who fails to notice how the world works and adapting himself accordingly. Fools are the ones who spit into the wind, who saw off the branch they're sitting on, who are constantly trying to row their boat against the current because they simply do not pay attention to how life works. Fools are also un-teachable. It's not only that they fail to make good observations on what works and what doesn't, fools also refuse to listen when others point these things out for them, just like in Facebook political arguments. As the old adage says, "Fools are often in error, but never in doubt!"

In fact, the more foolish a person is, the more likely it is that he or she will become more and more isolated as time goes by. Why? Because people eventually give up on fools. "There is no sense in talking to him." We have all heard the phrase "a fool's paradise." And that phrase is a reflection of how it often goes: having cut himself off from those who could teach him valuable lessons, having blocked his own vision to keep from seeing the consequences of his own actions, the fool becomes an island unto himself.

So, Jesus presents this person in the parable as a fool. Now many might say that planning for the future is not a foolish move. The man is just protecting his assets, right? I know lots of people who make sure there is money for retirement and for a rainy day. Saving money can't be a bad thing. After all, didn't Joseph receive dreams from God, while in Egypt, to store up food and resources for the famine to come? The thing is that this parable and the story of Joseph are very different. Let me explain why.

The man in the parable was already rich to begin with. Some commentators suggest that his farmland was the better part of a district or county, which for those times would be the equivalent of some large corporate farms. The second thing we note is that the rich man's bins were already full, and he was already very well off without counting all that grain already in storage.

Instead of selling the grain he already has, or selling the new harvest he is bringing in, which we should note was a bumper crop, he instead decides to tear down his barns to make even bigger ones. It is interesting to note that the parables dialogue is actually a monologue since the rich man is the only one talking and as far as we can tell, there is no audience listening to him. In his speech there is no concern for anyone else; he only cares that he lives in luxury for all his days.

Now if we compare this to the story of Joseph, we see that there was a purpose for the storing of all the grain of Egypt for seven years. The Lord had told Joseph that there was a

famine coming, and the grain was to be used for everyone, not just the Pharaoh and the rich, not even for just the Egyptians, but for all the people of the region that were affected by the famine.

The sin of this rich man in today's scripture is that he has isolated himself from his fellow humanity, from the larger community, and from God. But then he is interested in only himself. He is not interested in sharing with those who have less. He doesn't even see those folks. They exist beyond the margins of his consciousness.

This story isn't really about telling us all to give more to the church or the poor, although I think we all know that the church and the poor could both use more money. This story is about people hoarding so much that they don't even recognize that their focus is on themselves and money, and nothing else.

I have a couple of examples. A few months ago, I was doing my morning workout and overheard two other people talking about very rich people and their money. If I remember correctly, they were specifically talking about Jeff Bezos, the head honcho of Amazon, who is currently worth 165.6 BILLION dollars. One of them was saying that if we taxed people like Mr. Bezos, they could not afford to be philanthropic. I believe they were discussing a two million dollar donation that he made to a charity. Now to most of us two million dollars sounds like big money, right? But if you compare that to what his net worth is, it is insignificant. To put in into perspective we know that 60 seconds is a minute. 1,000 seconds is about 17 minutes. A million seconds is 12 days. A billion seconds is almost 32 years. So if every dollar Mr. Bezos has was a second it would add up to be 5,299.2 years! Like I said, two million dollars would be a big deal to me, but for him, it is the equivalent of picking a piece of lint off the sleeve of his suit and throwing it away. The man has more money than all of us together will make if we added it up and did it for 100 lifetimes! How can amassing so much wealth, and doing nothing with it be healthy?

Here's another story. The New York Times has long had a column called "Metropolitan Diary" that features six to eight brief letters sent in by readers who relate real-life experiences in the Big Apple. Many of these anecdotes are examples of kindness and warmth in the midst of a city reputed to be cold and uncaring. Some are laugh-out-loud funny tales about the quirks of people: after all, in a city of 8 million folks, you are bound to see just about everything at least once! But many other anecdotes center on the outrageous wealth that many people in New York City possess as well as the sometimes startling things people do with that wealth.

For example. A couple from the Midwest was visiting New York during a cold stretch in the month of January. As they walked up Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, a bitterly cold wind came up, causing the woman's ears to get painfully cold. They decided to duck into a boutique to purchase a hat for her. The woman rather quickly found a lovely cashmere knit hat and was about to buy it when her husband noticed the price tag dangling from the cap: \$350. They put it back and quickly fled the store. As they came back out onto the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue, however, they saw a woman passing by carrying her little poodle dog—and the dog was wearing that very cashmere knit hat! Some people have so much they literally don't know what to do with it.

In our scripture the man's failure is, as such failures always tend to be, a double failure. Not only did he fail to see God, consequently he likewise did not take note of all those little reminders of God that surround each of us every day. So, what are those reminders? Other people. The images of God in our midst.

The more open a person is to God in his or her daily life, the more likely it is that this person will begin to SEE God all over: the face of the neighbor is the face of God, the face of the

poor is the face of God. But in the case of this rich man, he lost sight not only of God, but of God's children who were also nearby.

Jesus had a specific spiritual vision he tried to share with the world. Thus, in Jesus we see the exact opposite of this rich man's fatal flaw of spiritual blindness. Jesus has used agricultural examples in his parables before, still it is interesting that the crop this rich man raised and then wanted to store away for himself was grain. Wheat; the stuff that becomes the bread of life. By hoarding his wheat, this man was not a life-sharer or life-giver but someone who deprived others of life. When God says in the end that this fool's life would be demanded of him, the punishment fit the crime.

But we should notice God's last question: "Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" It is an open, unanswered question. The implication, however, seems to be that by his death, all that life-giving grain will go to feed the very people he had failed to notice! By his death he became a dispenser of life after all. But not in a heroic way. I don't think that makes this parable's ending a "happy ending" at all. Yet sometimes it does happen that through death can come new life.

If you haven't figured it out by now, let me say this rich man who ignored God is a counter example for what Christians are supposed to be. But that is no surprise since Christians follow a man who once said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit."

By his death and resurrection Jesus gives us life after death. It sets the tone for our own daily dying and rising with Christ, too. Let's remember to focus on seeing God, and God's children in the world, and not focusing on greed and idols; in whatever shape they may be. Amen.