

THE RICH FOOL
Rev. Jason Santalucia

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Text: Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And 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." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then 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. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But 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?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Money is one of those things we're all taught at an early age not to bring up in polite company, but apparently Jesus never learned that lesson. He talked about money and possessions more than just about any other topic. And this morning we're looking at one of those passages.

He's talking to a crowd of people when a man asks him to settle a dispute he's having with his brother over their inheritance. But instead of getting pulled into a family squabble, Jesus takes the opportunity to talk about money—specifically the attitude we have toward money and how it shapes our lives.

So with the crowd looking on, Jesus does what he usually does when he's making a point that might be a little challenging for some. He tells a parable.

Let's start with the main character—really the only character. He's often referred to as "the rich fool," but he doesn't come across as a bad person. He seems to have made his money by honest means. Jesus doesn't say he cheated anyone or stole from anyone or did anything unscrupulous. As far as we know, he got rich by the sweat of his brow. He worked hard, and he did well. His land produced abundantly.

There also doesn't seem to be anything wrong with how he plans to store all the surplus grain. He's only doing what any wise person would do. He's planning for the future. He's saving for a rainy day. What's wrong with that?

The truth is there's nothing wrong with saving for a rainy day. That's not the issue. The "foolishness" of the man doesn't have anything to do with the fact that he wants to provide for himself down the road. His spiritual illness, if you want to call it that, is in the way he relates to his money, which has cut him off from other people and even alienated him from God.

Listen again to the little conversation he has with himself: "What should I do," he says, "for I have no place to store my crops? I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

Notice how all he thinks about and all he cares about is what *he* wants to do with *his* stuff. That's his whole focus. *I will do this, and I will do that with my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my soul.* If you take all the first-person pronouns out of that paragraph, there's practically nothing left.

So that's part of his spiritual illness. He's all about the unholy trinity of me, myself, and I. His wealth has caused him to become almost aggressively self-absorbed. When he thinks about the future, he's the only one in the picture. There's no family, no friends, and no God.

The other part of his spiritual illness is revealed when God addresses him: "You fool!" God says. "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" In the face of death, the truth is laid bare: No amount of money or possessions can save the man from his mortality. No matter how much he accumulates, he's still going to die, sooner than later it turns out, and nothing can change that, not even a bunch of shiny new barns filled to the rafters.

Now, on one level, I think we all recognize the man's foolishness. We all know what money can do; we all know it can change our priorities. And we all know what it can't do; we all know it can't make us immortal. Or at least we all know that in our heads. Our hearts, however, are a different story. They often take a little more convincing—mainly because they're so susceptible to fear.

All our lives, we worry about one thing or another: losing our jobs, paying our bills, saving for retirement. We find it so hard to put our trust in a God who promises to always be with us, and to always take care of us. But as Christians, that's what we're called to do. We're called, not to look inward and depend on ourselves, but to look outward and depend on God.

And as our focus moves outward in that way, we start to look at our money and possessions very differently. First, we realize nothing we have is ours to begin with. It all comes from God, and it all belongs to God. Even the talents and abilities by which we're able to go out and earn our money are themselves gifts from God.

In the parable, the Rich Fool hasn't figured that out. He hasn't figured out that everything he has is on loan, and he's only the custodian of it, not the owner. And to put that in terms we might understand today, we could ask ourselves how much someone like Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos will be worth when they die. The answer is: the same as you and me. Death is the great equalizer. When we die, no matter how much we have in the bank, our net worth goes to zero.

The other thing we realize when our focus moves outward is that, if all we have comes from God, then we have an obligation to use what we have—our money, our talents, our abilities—not for our own purposes, but for God's purposes. And this realization moves us from being consumers of resources to stewards of God's gifts. We start asking different questions about how to use our wealth: *Do I really need this, or is it a want I can live without? How can I use what I have to make the world a better place, even if it's only in a small way? How can I turn the things I've been blessed with into a blessing for people around me?*

It doesn't mean we have to neglect ourselves. It doesn't mean we can't think about our personal needs. It just means we try to balance our needs with the needs of others. It just means we make our lives about something other than me, myself, and I.

So Jesus' teaching here is not a condemnation of money and possessions; it's an invitation to view money and possessions differently. Can material wealth provide us with a comfortable life? Absolutely. Can it give us confidence in God's loving care? Can it help us form right relationships with God and each other? I think we all know the answer to that.

Jesus invites us this morning into a life far greater than our worries and fears about things that have no ultimate worth. He invites us into a life of meaning and purpose, connection and peace. He offers us lasting treasures beyond compare. Amen.