

What Shall We Do With Our Possessions?

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Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”

Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” LUKE 12:13-21

USA Today once ran an article on what people would do for a million dollars. Forty-two percent of those polled would do at least one of the following four things for a million dollars: spend two years in jail, permanently move to a foreign country, never see their best friend again, or throw their pet off a cliff. My family had a parakeet at the time. We would have been happy to throw our pet off a cliff.

The question is really a joke. But in the midst of Americans jokingly asking one another this question, Aldrich and Rosario Ames were found guilty of betraying their country and sending 10 to 12 people to their deaths for about \$2 million. Suddenly the joke was not so funny. Perhaps you think, “What does something like that have to do with me?” Perhaps you feel you are above such a temptation. Jesus apparently does not think so, because He spoke a great deal about the danger of greed.

This parable comes at a time in Jesus’ ministry when he was teaching huge crowds. In Luke 12:13 someone in one of those crowds shouts, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” In effect, Jesus answers rather brusquely, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter? It is not my role to resolve family disputes.” Jesus refused to give the man what he demanded, but He did give him what he needed—a warn-

ing. Jesus says, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. . .” Watch out and be on guard. Jesus gives this warning twice because He knows how very easy it is for us to succumb to greed.

It is easy to find oneself thinking, “If I just had a bit more money, I could afford a slightly larger house. Then I would have one bedroom for each of my kids, and they wouldn’t fight anymore. My family would be happy at last.” Perhaps you believe if your boss would just give you a raise, then you could have a nice vacation for a change, and you and your wife could get your life, or marriage, back together. “If we just had a little more money...” “If my boss only knew what I really deserve...” It is very easy to think we could be happy if we just had a little bit more.

The truth is, extra possessions do give us a small lift. Premium orange juice does taste a little better than bargain orange juice. It really is nice to have a slightly newer car. But nicer possessions only give a small and temporary lift, then we want a little bit more. Jesus labels this problem greed, and He tells us to watch out for it.

In Luke 12, Jesus replies to a man who does not have enough by telling a story about a man who has too much. Outwardly, these men seem to be opposites, but inwardly they share something. The story begins with the account of a rich farmer. This man did not become prosperous through any corruption or evil deeds, but by God’s giving him abundance from the ground.

This farmer must decide where to put all of his crops, and so he builds bigger barns. In today’s terms we might say that he makes a capital investment designed to protect his non-durable assets. It seems like a good business decision.

The farmer then tells himself, “Now, you can take life easy. Your problem is solved.” This man appears to be nothing more than a sensible businessman. However, let us look at this parable again with added emphasis:

He thought to himself, “What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.” Then he said, “This is what I will do. I will tear down my barns, and I will build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to myself, ‘Self, you take life easy. You eat. You drink. You be merry.’”

This emphasis on the personal pronouns is even stronger in the original language. Of 54 words in the original Greek parable, 18 have either “I,” “my,” “me,” “myself,” or a command that the farmer gives to himself. This man prefers to talk to himself rather than to God, his wife, his friends, his neighbors, or his children. He talks to himself about himself! His credo is, “Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” In order to accomplish this, he thinks he has to solve a storage problem, but the parable reveals that this man’s real problem is with his ego. This farmer is living for himself.

The farmer also thinks he is talking only to himself, but he finds there is actually a witness to this discussion—God. God says, in effect, “I’ve been hearing what you’ve been saying, and I say to you, ‘You fool!’ This very night, your life will be demanded from you.” The term fool does not mean stupid. This man actually seems quite clever. In the Bible, a fool is someone who does not believe in the reality of God. The fool may or may not believe God exists, but if He does exist, the fool believes He does not pay any attention to the affairs of man. God says, “Not so. I will call you to account.”

This man’s life will be demanded from him. The word ‘demanded’ is a financial term—a word used for recalling a loan. God says, “Your life and your possessions are not really yours. They are on loan from Me, and at the end of your life I am going to recall that loan and ask you to render an account of what you have done.”

In the end, he will lose his life and all his possessions. He will learn that the god of money always betrays us in our hour of greatest need. This is the final reality for anyone who is not rich toward God.

So what does it mean to be rich toward God? Does this parable apply to people who do not have much money, or is it only for those who are well-off? If you read the Bible as a whole, it is clear that this parable is for everyone. Both rich and poor are prone to answer the question, “How much is enough?” the same way: “Just a little bit more ... just a little bit more.” Greed can infect poor neighborhoods in the spirit of complaint, worry and grasping for more. It can affect upwardly-mobile neighborhoods in the pursuit of food, drink and clothing.

We complain about our cars, our homes, even our lack of storage space. We don’t have enough belongings, yet we need more storage space? No matter how many closets we have, we eventually fill them all so full that they become hazardous to open. Still we convince ourselves, somehow, that we do not have enough. We store up for ourselves, but we are not rich toward God.

RICH IN MIND

The first way we can be rich toward God is with our minds. To be rich with your mind means to cast off worry and grasping. It means believing God when He tells us that He clothes the grass of the field, He feeds the birds and the ravens and He will surely care for us.

Maybe the poor have good reason to be concerned about their material needs, but it seems that the middle class, the upper-middle class and the rich can find things to worry about too. As I listen to people talk, it seems that no matter how much they have, they can foresee a day when they might run out of money. They might get laid off, the stock market might crash, there might be toxic waste found in their backyard, and so on. I urge you to oppose the culture of complaint and promote a culture of contentment in yourself and among those around you. Learn to say, “I am pleased. What God gives me is enough.”

RICH TOWARDS OTHERS

Second, foster a spirit of liberality. Learn to delight in giving to others. When I began seminary, my wife and I spent most of our savings to pay tuition, then she began to look for work. Debbie is a very talented woman, but she was just out of college and her credentials were not that impressive. At every interview she seemed to come in second. I was taking 18 credit hours and could only work part-time. However, I could not seem to find even part-time work. Six weeks went by and our total combined income—including gifts—was \$140.

During this time another seminary family asked us to dinner. We had a wonderful time eating Swedish meatballs and noodles, and four days later, they called to ask us over again. During a span of about six weeks, they had us over seven times. Debbie and I would often wonder during those days whether we had made a huge mistake and were going to go bankrupt. But every time the conversation arose, one of us would say, “No, God will take care of us. After all, He’s already given us Mark and Adele.” Now we knew that dinner at a friend’s house once a week would not keep the creditors away, but those friends were a token of God’s promise to provide for us. By fostering a spirit of liberality, even those who do not have much themselves can delight in being rich toward God.

RICH TOWARD THE KINGDOM

Lastly, we can be rich toward God in our tithing. Tithing can be a truly generous sacrifice, but it can also become formulaic. God does not call us to look at our income, calculate a percentage, write a check and

then walk away. In our tithing and in our other giving as well, we are called not to look down and in, but to look up and out. Jesus wants us to look at the needs that exist and give with a spirit of generosity. Christ is performing splendid and glorious works in His Church and in His Kingdom. His Kingdom is breaking into the world; He is binding the power of Satan; and lives are being made new. There is

joy in giving of oneself and one's possessions for the Kingdom. Be rich toward God in your giving to the work of His Kingdom.

God does not call us to look at our possessions, to worry, or to calculate. He has given us all that we need and so much more. He has given us His Son. He has certainly been rich toward us, and now He calls us to look up and out to Christ and His work. He calls us to be rich toward Him.

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