

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

14 But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15 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.”

16 Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’

18 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. 19 And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’

20 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?’ 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

## FOOL

“You fool.”

I don’t know about you but those are fight’em words where I come from. No one wants to be called a fool.

But, in our lesson for today it is God who calls a man a fool. When God calls you a fool there’s not much you can do about it.

God didn’t say this man made a bad choice. God didn’t say this man needed a few weeks of therapy. God said this man was a fool.

And as one comedian is fond of saying, “You can’t cure stupid.”

The Lord judged this man most harshly. Why? What did this man do that made him a fool?

In the Bible foolishness is not merely stupidity but an arrogant disregard for God. The Psalmist wrote, “Fools say in their hearts, there is no God.” (See Psalm 14 and 53)

That’s the important point. What do we believe about God in our hearts? Often that is revealed not in what we say but in what we do.

## WHY WAS HE FOOLISH?

Let’s look more closely at the parable and see what it was that made this man so foolish.

Jesus said that a rich man had a problem. But, it was a good problem. He had a bumper crop, and he needed a place to store the excess.

The rich man thought of a solution to his problem. He would tear down the old barns and build newer, bigger barns. Then he would have ample storage for all his stuff.

Was he foolish because he worked hard and was rich? Jesus did say that riches sometimes made it hard to be a faithful person ... that it was easier for a rich man to go through the eye of the needle than to enter God's kingdom.

But, that's not exactly the message of this passage.

The parable does not say that this man was foolish because he worked hard and had a lot of stuff.

All the Bible tells us is that this man was rich and that one year his land produced abundantly.

Those of you who have ever spent any time on the farm know that the land does not produce abundantly on its own. Farmers don't get rich unless they are really good at their job. That's the reason his land produced abundantly.

So, he wasn't foolish because he was rich and successful. In fact we might rightly admire his hard work.

Well maybe he was foolish because he built bigger barns.

I'm not so sure that is the heart of the problem either. I would contend that this was just a prudent way to prepare for the future.

I have long term care insurance. I have life insurance. I have a retirement savings plan. I wish I could afford more. And I would advise anyone that its never too soon to start saving for the future.

If we have a bumper crop its only prudent to build bigger barns. After all didn't Joseph tell Pharaoh to prepare for the coming famine by building bigger barns?

I don't think the man was foolish because he built bigger barns.

## COMBATTING GREED

This man was foolish because he was greedy. He did not care about anything but himself.

Charles Dickens described the solitary, self-centered nature of greed in the person of Scrooge. He wrote,

“Oh! But he was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone. Scrooge!

A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping clutching, covetousness old sinner!

Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.”

We know Scrooge.

Many in our day and time also live by the “greed is good” motto. (Some of you may remember the greed is good speech from the prophetic 1987 movie, Wall Street.)

The reason for the latest economic downturn was that people were greedy. People took out loans that they knew they couldn’t afford.

And some other people were quite happy to give them those loans. They overinflated the value of the property and falsified the underwriting process.

Then they bundled these bad loans and sold them to investors. And greed eventually caused a financial disaster for the whole country.

So, greed is a big problem today. But, greed is not just a problem for the wealthy. Greed is a universal problem. It’s a problem for the rich. It’s a problem for the poor. It’s a problem for people of faith.

In short, Greed is a problem for all of us. There’s a bit of Scrooge in all of us.

No, we might not be rich. We might not be in the business of building bigger barns. But, all of us can be lured by siren call of greed.

So, how do we respond to that? Do we just counter the “greed is good” motto by saying that “greed is bad”?

I wish it were that easy. But, it’s not.

Greed is bad.

But, we can’t “just say no” to greed. We have to understand why greed is such a temptation to all of us.

When Jesus was asked by someone in the crowd to make a judgment about an inheritance, Jesus refused to do it.

Jesus said that he wasn’t in a position to make a judgment about who was right and who was wrong in that case.

But, Jesus did issue a warning to everyone. Jesus said,

“Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed.”

So, the prescription for greed is self-awareness. Take care. Be on guard.

## TRUST

And our mindfulness is informed by this next phrase, “Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” We guard against greed by asking ourselves a hard question, “Do I trust God to give me what I need? Or do I put my trust in what I own?”

The key to answering that question comes not from what we tell others but by what we say to ourselves, what we say in our hearts. That’s the important point in this parable.

The rich man builds bigger barns for a reason. He does it to make his future secure. He puts ultimate trust in that bumper crop. In other words his possessions become an idol, a false god.

Notice that the rich man does not thank God for what he has. Instead, he talks to himself. He says, “Self, you are in hog heaven. You’ve arrived. You’ve got it made. Eat, drink and be merry.”

But, as we know, he’s in for a rude awakening. Money is a poor god in the face of mortality.

I am amused that our money contains the motto, “In God we trust.” Some say that we should take that off of our money because it violates the separation of church and state.

I would say that the motto simply tells the truth. Yes, “in God we trust.” And the God we trust in is the almighty dollar. We think that if only we had enough money we would be secure.

But, no amount of money is ever enough. We always want just a little bit more. Why is that? We are using money for the wrong purpose. We ask money to give us a secure future. And money can’t do that.

Money is a tool. It’s a great tool that can do a lot of good. But, it’s just a tool. And like any tool it can be misused.

St. Augustine once said that God gave us people to love and money to use, but most of us reverse that order.

## THE LOVE OF MONEY

People misquote the Bible when it comes to money. They say that money is the root of all evil.

Actually what the Bible says is that the “love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” It comes from Paul’s first letter to Timothy, and when you look at the full context of that phrase its even more instructive.

Paul wrote, “For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

Money makes a very poor god. The Bible tells us that we cannot serve God and Mammon (or the god of money). (Luke 16:13)

We have to choose. And if we choose money, then we have “wandered away” from the faith.

I like that way of putting it. It’s not that we have consciously chosen to deny God. We have just wandered away, like a lost puppy.

We do not know what is good for us. We are foolish. And for that reason many of our wounds are self-inflicted.

Hebrews 13:5 put it this way,

“Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’”

In other words, we need to trust God to give us our daily bread. We need to trust in the Providence of God. We need to trust in the fact that God will never leave or forsake us.

As Paul put it, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31) We need to ask that question every day.

It’s one thing to say that we trust God in theory. It’s another thing to trust that in practice.

## MONEY AND SPIRITUAL NEED

There is a show on TV about large and extravagant homes.

The owner of the home will show off his or her 10 million dollar bedroom complete with his and her bathrooms filled with expensive gold fixtures. I even saw one home that revolved so that the picture window could always get the best view.

I’m fascinated by these extreme homes. But, I’m also fascinated by the people who own those homes.

I just can’t get past the obvious question. Why would anyone need a 10 million dollar bedroom?

And as I hear these people talk the answer to the question becomes apparent. It’s not about the bedroom. It’s about something that is missing in the life of the person who owns that bedroom.

They are showing their home off to the world because the home represents the fact that they have made it. The home validates them as a person.

But, I have a feeling that one day soon they will feel the need to buy a 20 million dollar bedroom.

We all do this. Admittedly we do it on a smaller scale. But, we all have tried to fill a spiritual need with money or possessions or food or whatever.

Jesus tells us that we need to be aware of this. We need to remember that life is not about how much stuff we own. Life is about trusting in God for our daily bread and for eternity.

A woman told her rather prickly old pastor, “I need to seek your counsel.”

“About what,” he asked.

She replied, “Well, my boss has offered me a promotion. It’s flattering, but it would require a move, and I’m away from the kids so much already. I just need some help thinking it through.”

The pastor cut her off short, “You don’t need to talk to me! Jesus doesn’t care about all that stuff!”

As you can imagine, the woman was not happy. She stormed home vowing to never enter that church again. But, then the woman, who knew her Bible, began to think about what the pastor had said.

She thought about this particular passage and said, “I guess what he meant to say was that Jesus doesn’t care about my upward mobility. Those sorts of things just don’t interest Jesus.

And maybe they shouldn’t interest me either.”

Not being interested in upward mobility sounds almost sacrilegious in the modern world. And that’s the point.

We have to choose our religion. Do we want to be rich in things?

Or, do we want to be rich toward God?

## THE BREAD OF LIFE

Most of us are here today because we want to be rich toward God. If we didn’t believe that we’d be at the beach working on our tan.

But, our encounter with Jesus has changed us. At some point in our life we have come face to face with the fact that we are mortal. We have come face to face with the fact that we have been very foolish, that we have been trying to live without God.

And in the face of that sobering revelation we have had to re-evaluate our priorities. We have decided that we need to be rich towards God. We believe that there is more to life than a day at the beach.

The Scripture doesn’t tell us what happened to the man who asked Jesus to intervene in the dispute over the inheritance. I suspect that he was able to find other “Rabbis” who were more sympathetic to his case.

There are always people around who are quite willing to tell us what we want to hear, that we “deserve a break today,” that we “only go around once in life so we have to grab for all the gusto that we can get.”

But, Jesus won't tell us that. Jesus is not interested in pandering to our greed. Jesus won't answer questions that trivialize and demean the lives we are meant to live.

Instead, Jesus leads us to ask different questions, questions that are worth asking, questions about what is really true and worthwhile and lasting.

Through the wisdom and grace of Jesus we can learn what is worth living for and, more importantly, we can also learn what is worth dying for.

Again we come to the mystery and the challenge of communion. We have a king whose throne is a cross and whose greatest accomplishment was to die for those he loved.

The world has always thought such sacrifice to be foolishness.

But, long after the millionaires and billionaires of our generation are forgotten, people will still find hope and new life and forgiveness in this eternal king.

Without him we too would fritter our lives away on foolish things, trying to get more and more because our hearts are empty.

But, Jesus feeds us more than a line. He feeds us this bread and this drink. Body broken and blood shed tell of us a greater way and a greater life, life that is eternal.

Let us take up our cross and follow Him.

Amen.