

Year C Proper 18 Rich Toward God Luke 12 vv13 to 21

Why is the rich man considered a fool? He seems to be saving for the future just like we've been taught to do by our society. Isn't this the responsible thing to do? This rich man is not a fool because he is wealthy. He is not a fool because he is saving for the future. Did you notice what Jesus has said right before he launches into the story and what he says right after he finishes the story?

Before the story Jesus says, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

We hear the word, "greed" in there and it helps us to understand Jesus' reaction to the young man who asked Jesus to make his brother share his inheritance and why Jesus refused to help with his request. In those days, the elder brother always got a "double portion" of the inheritance. In the case of two brothers then, the older brother would receive two-thirds while the younger brother got one-third. It is clearly the younger brother who approaches Jesus today and asks Jesus to compel his older brother to share the larger inheritance with him. He wants a 50-50 split. The younger brother calls Jesus, "Rabbi" – teacher – indicating that Jesus, as with all rabbis at that time, did have the authority to make the decision on the younger brother's request.

Jesus refuses to do this and then turns to the crowd and warns them to be on guard against all kinds of greed. Jesus is telling the younger brother not to be greedy. Jesus could easily discern that the request for more of the inheritance was coming from a place of reliance upon material goods for personal satisfaction and happiness. Paul calls greed "idolatry" which also helps us to better understand the

parable Jesus then tells us. We idolize what we desire – we place huge value on what we long for and work hard to get.

We are, of course, helped along in this “idolatry” by marketing. But marketers are actually just turning to their advantage what comes instinctually to humans. In an article in *Psychology Today*, researchers reveal that our relentless pursuit of “more” came about as our ancestors from long ago who had an insatiable drive to acquire resources, status, and social connections were the ones more likely to survive and reproduce successfully<sup>i</sup>. In a tough world of scarcity, this drive for more was necessary to survive. This strong desire for more became a characteristic that was passed along and hard-wired into human brains. It also created what scientists call the “hedonic treadmill”. That means that every time people acquire more, their satisfaction level only temporarily increases. Satisfaction always eventually drops so that people once again experience the desire for more. This holds true even of millionaires. Harvard psychologist, Ashley Whilans, published an article in which she explains that, in a survey of “a few thousand of the world’s wealthiest people, asking how much they’d need to be ‘perfectly happy,’ seventy-five percent (many of whom had a net worth of \$10 million or more) said they’d need ‘a lot more’ (\$5 million to \$10 million, ‘at the very least’) to be happy.”<sup>ii</sup> Okay, so if you wondered why the rich man was said to be foolish when he simply seems to be doing some good financial security planning, then you are in good company. What’s the problem Jesus is addressing?

Our clue to figuring this out is in how the rich man talks to himself. “What should I do?” he asks himself. “I will do this...I will pull down my barns...I will store all my grain...” “I” and “my” over and over again in just a few short verses. When humans allow the relentless pursuit of more and the constant need for greater levels of

satisfaction to dictate their thinking and behaviour then this thinking and behaviour is inevitably highly self-centred. This creates the “every man for himself”, “dog eat dog” world in which we are so very familiar and, in which indeed, many of us participate knowingly or unknowingly. This is not what we learn in scripture.

Last week, Jesus taught us that we belong together, looking out for one another so that all people have enough. When you pray, he said, say this: “Our Father...give us our daily bread, forgive us our sins...” and so on. Jesus taught us how to build community, form one great family. Christians are meant to do the hard work of rewiring our brains, doing away with the instinct to acquire more and more stuff for survival and security. That, of course, leads us to the obvious question: Where do we find our survival and security? The just as obvious answer is “in God.” If it were as easy as saying it, we’d be all set.

Immediately after where we leave off in Luke’s Gospel story today, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear...For it is the nations of the world that strive after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for God’s kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.” Don’t worry about food. Don’t worry about clothing. Don’t worry about having a roof over your head. Don’t worry about having enough money to pay your bills. Don’t worry. How many of us throughout our lives have never had to worry about money, ever? How many of us don’t have more stuff than we need laying about? How many clocks do you have in your house? Knick knacks? Pictures on the wall? How many drawers full of clothes? Shoes?

Put your complete trust and reliance for life and all things in God and don’t store up treasure for yourself but be rich toward God instead. Like I said, if this were easy,

we'd be all set. God's kingdom would be incredibly close to its fulness on earth as in heaven. But it's *not* easy. Not one of us is able to fully trust in God, not able to fully turn our back on that instinctual drive to acquire more. We are a work in progress. This is one of those instances in which we discover the pricelessness of being the body of Christ – the Church – together. How so?

Well, Jesus shows us today that this individualistic, dog eat dog way of thinking always comes at the expense of others. The rich man didn't give a single passing thought to the people around him who did not have the abundance he now has. No thought of sharing with others entered his head. Instead, he who was rich simply got richer – something that is an increasing problem in our world today. The wealth gap between rich and poor is growing. What started as an individual way of thinking in order to survive, became a corporate, systemic way of thinking. This thinking created social and economic classes and all of society's problems that go along with that. We live in a time where it feels impossible to undo all of this. It will be a monumental task to eliminate inequalities and injustices, to level the playing field, so to speak. But the brokenness *is* being undone – the hills *are* being made low and the valleys *are* being lifted up – and we, as the Church, are a part of that leveling. We are able to be together what we struggle to be on our own. When we gather as the Church, we are cultivating a different mindset, a countercultural mindset, based on what we experience as we worship.

You may think that new and different mindset comes from hearing the Word of God, the teachings of Christ, like this story that we heard today. That certainly is an obvious source but it is far from being the only source. Our bodies teach us this mindset as we, for example, stand in solidarity in worship and praise of something beyond ourselves and beyond all of the worldly goods that wait for us outside these

walls. We share the peace with whoever stands beside us regardless of social-economic or ethnic background. We pray for the needs of others and for ourselves as a community. We express the longing for the whole world to join us in harmony as one great family of God at the banquet table in the fullness of God's kingdom on earth. The selflessness and hard work of our ACW, for example, raising money throughout the year to give it to others in need, is the selflessness meant to be on display by the whole Church of God throughout the world.

What a different place this world would be. And that's the point. When God's desires are our desires, when God's ways are our ways, when God's purpose is our purpose, then we will change and, in being changed, we will change the world. We are to be more and more influenced in thought, word, and deed by God and God's ways – setting our minds on the things above, as Paul advises – and less and less influenced by the world's ways. Anthony de Mello S.J, in *One Minute Wisdom*, writes of "Detachment": "It intrigued his disciples that the Master who lives so simply would not condemn his wealthy followers. 'It is rare but not impossible for someone to be rich and holy,' he said one day. 'How?' 'When money has the effect on his heart that the shadow of that bamboo has on the courtyard.' The disciples turned to watch the bamboo's shadow sweep the courtyard without stirring a single particle of dust." (p.83)

Let us be immovable and steadfast in the light of the Sun and, clothed with Christ, let us show the world how rich this life truly is.

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/common-sense-science/202506/why-more-is-never-enough?msockid=20ce97b5290f62b2013383dd2898630b>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/19/even-millionaires-make-this-money-mindset-mistake-says-harvard-psychologistheres-the-real-cost-of-it.html?msockid=20ce97b5290f62b2013383dd2898630b>