

Rich, but Not Distracted

Luke 12:13-21

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹³Someone 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 toward God.”

I

Most sermons on this passage in Luke offer the same basic interpretation, more or less. That basic interpretation runs something like this: Be generous with your wealth! Don’t be like the fool in this parable, who one day decided to hoard his bumper crops. But because he died that same night, he never got to enjoy his wealth. Poor man. Foolish man. Don’t be like him. Instead be generous. Be kind. Help other people.

We preachers have lots of ways to gussy up a sermon and make it sound more sophisticated than it really is. But usually we have one simple point we’re trying to get across. For this story in Luke 12, that simple point is to be generous. Act differently than the rich man. Open your hands and let your stuff go.

Today I offer you an alternate message, a different interpretation. It’s this. The rich man’s problem isn’t so much that he’s rich and hoards everything. Instead his problem is that he’s distracted. His wealth distracts him from God.

II

Sometimes you’ll find the clue to interpreting a parable in what comes immediately before the parable. Just before Jesus tells this parable, a man in the crowd steps up with a demand: “Hey, tell my brother to divide up the family inheritance with me.” We don’t know if this man in the crowd was rich or poor, old or young, married or

single. We do know he's fixated on money. He wants his share of the inheritance. He's peeved at his brother who won't share. Intervene in this dispute, Jesus. Make him give me what's mine. I want it.

Jesus refuses to mediate this dispute between brothers. Why? Because Jesus thinks the man in the crowd is focused on the wrong thing. He realizes the man in the crowd has a deeper, more pressing problem. The man's thoughts and emotions, his consuming purpose and passion, are zeroed in on getting a share of that inheritance.

The man's problem is greed.

III

As I said, we don't know if the man in the crowd is rich, poor, or middle class. It doesn't matter anyway, because everyone is capable of greed no matter how much money they make. I've known some very greedy poor people and some very ungreedy rich people.

For a bunch of years, I was greedy. I was obsessed about money—how to make more of it, how to pay the bills, whether we had enough retirement. Most of my waking thoughts turned on money. This went on for more years than I want to admit. Jenny kept telling me we'd be fine. Even Anita Kehr, one of the former pastors here, kept telling me I didn't have much to worry about. Two wise women telling me to chill, but I still wouldn't do it. I fussed, fumed, fretted. Income and invoices crowded my brain. God was off somewhere in the corner. I thought about God, yes; but I thought about money more. I was greedy. Greed did to me what greed usually does: it shoved God to the periphery. From this I learned that greed can sneak up on people no matter what their level of income. Here's the decisive question: what percentage of your thoughts and energies are devoted to money—keeping it, acquiring things with it, and getting more of it?

IV

In response to the greedy man in the crowd, Jesus told a parable. There was a big-time farmer, he said, who had a bumper harvest one year. It was a bigger yield than he

ever had before, because his storage bins weren't big enough to hold it all. That bumper harvest took over the center of his life. In the man's mind and heart, there are two haunting realities: his crops and himself. Listen to this man's true preoccupation as he resolves what to do:

What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops? *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. *I* will say to *my* soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

I and *my* 11 times in 2½ sentences. Nowhere does this man on his own initiative think of God. God is not at the center; God is not even on the periphery; God is simply nowhere to be found in his calculations.

Greed has hijacked this man. The fact that he's rich is not quite the heart of the problem. More accurately, the problem is distraction. He forgot God.

God, however, did not forget him. At this point, when the man is consumed by himself, God intervenes with divine speech—and notice how carefully chosen are God's words.

- "This very night your life is being demanded of you."
- Not "I, God, am killing you tonight."
- Not "I will take you tonight" or even "I will send you to hell tonight."
- Instead "this very night your life is being demanded of you."

God is merely announcing what will happen to the man, tonight. God isn't taking any action here, except to point out that the man miscalculated. Death is imminent for this man, as it will be imminent one day for every human person. The natural course of the man's life is terminating in death, in just a few more hours.

The parable is now over, but Jesus turns back again to the man in the crowd, to the guy who's obsessing about his fair share of the inheritance. And Jesus has one more thing to say to this man. "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

V

What does it mean to be “rich toward God?” By design, a parable should provoke us. If we interpret a parable in a way that confirms conventional thinking, then perhaps we’re not understanding the parable very well.

This parable and its concluding zinger from Jesus are provocative. He never really explains what being rich toward God looks like. I think Jesus leaves the statement hanging on purpose, so it lingers in our minds, so we have to struggle with its application to our own lives.

How are you rich toward God?

I can’t answer this question for any of you. I can only try to answer it for myself, and that feebly.

- I am rich toward God when I kneel at night, just before going to bed, and in God’s presence try to admit the truth about myself—my shaky faith, my tumultuous relationship with God, my deep fears, my wild hopes.
- I am rich toward God when I keep slogging through the stuff God has seemingly called me to do. To stick with a vocation sometimes requires courage, sometimes dogged persistence, sometimes trust beyond evidence that your vocation will, in the greater economy of God, become a worthy investment.
- I am rich toward God when I work at community. Jenny recently pointed out that working at community is one of the hardest things anyone can do. And yet we Christians, in particular we Anabaptist-Mennonites, believe that community is an essential part of what God is trying to do in the world. Have you found out how tough that can be? To do the hard work of communicating? To stick with relationships even when you are hurt by them, and then to turn around and try to forgive as best you can? Keeping communal covenants can be costly.
- I am rich toward God when I play music and soak up art, when I smell flowers and savor a well-prepared cup of coffee.

- I am rich when my spirit rejoices and my heart leaps toward God.

What would it be for you? In what ways are you rich toward God?