

# The Rich Fool

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[ 0 : 00 ] I'm going to say what is probably the biggest cliché in the history of clichés, but life is short.

! As a minister every year I get to lead a lot of funerals. And among the different things that a minister does, I find that one of the most awesome privileges.

Every time it comes up, I can think, who am I to stand up at that moment, at the end of somebody's life that has been lived, whoever they are, however old or young they've been, and it's just an awesome, awesome privilege to be around at such a moment and to take that role.

But one thing that it does in my own mind is it reminds me over and over again that life is just so short. It's difficult to fulfil that function, if I can use that word in relation to the role, but in such a repeated way, and not be continually reminded that life is so short.

And that each generation comes and goes. And if you ever go to a cemetery and you look at a particular large one and you see all the different graves, the gravestones that are there, it's difficult not to be in that environment and not be reminded, to be in that environment and not be reminded of that reality.

[ 1 : 34 ] Life is short and each generation comes and we go. Now, forgive me if on a Sunday morning, and on a sunny one as well, that might sound a bit bleak.

It's really not meant to sound bleak. But if we're to properly grasp the good news of the gospel, and that is what the gospel is, that's what the Christian message is, it's good news.

Absolutely first and last, right the way through, the best piece of news that you can ever encounter. It is transformational. And if we're really going to grasp that, the only way we can do so is to be honest about reality.

Brutally honest about reality. Otherwise, otherwise we're sweeping reality under the carpet. And when Jesus came into the world, and all the stories and his teachings that we have recorded, that is exactly what Jesus does.

And he does it especially in this parable. He grasps that nettle. There's no apology for sounding bleak.

[ 2 : 49 ] He's brutally honest with reality, because that is the only way that the good news of the gospel, and everything that is so wonderful about it, can really properly land.

Now, it wasn't uncommon in the first century for people to take their unsettled disputes to their rabbi. And that's what happens now. This guy comes up, we don't know anything about his backstory.

Clearly, there's a family dispute going on over inheritance, and he wants Jesus to sort it out. But Jesus refuses to get mixed up in anyone's personal financial disputes here.

But, out of the request came the opportunity for Jesus to address what the attitude of any Christian disciple should be.

He takes it as an opportunity to speak into the human drive towards money and possessions.

[ 3 : 59 ] And at this point, it's helpful, perhaps, to be reminded of some words written about 1500 years after Jesus, but inspired by Jesus.

Words from John Calvin, who said, The human mind is a factory of idols, constantly elevating created things above our Creator.

And that is precisely what Jesus is speaking into, those habits of the human mind, to elevate those things which are the things that have been created, above the Creator that gives those things to us. Let's think a bit about that drive. What is it in us as human beings that drives us towards money and towards possessions?

Firstly, it could be power. Or rather, that quest for something that's in us that just likes to impress others.

[ 5 : 06 ] There's a story about a freshly minted lieutenant in the army. And he's really keen to impress the very first private that walks into his office.

So he hears somebody knock on the door. He grabs his phone, his landline phone, and says, Yes, come in! And the private comes in, and he says, over the phone, pretends that he's having a conversation with his general.

And he says, Yes, general! Thank you, general! You can count on me, general! Thank you! Slams the phone down. Turns to the private and says, What can I do for you? He says, I've just come to connect your phone. Let's be honest with ourselves.

Let's be brutally honest with ourselves. There's something in us that likes to impress. We've just got that promotion. Or we've just been given that bit of recognition.

Or whatever. It's something about us that perhaps just likes others to know about that. And maybe that may exist in different humans to a greater extent or a much smaller extent.

[ 6 : 14 ] But it's part of what it is to be human. Maybe it's that craving just to be recognized, that craving for connection, that just gets distorted along the way.

Whatever it is. Sometimes, it's messed up within all of that sense of craving because money so often creates power. Maybe that's what drives it sometimes. But it may not be that.

Another thing to think about is entitlement. That sense within us that just locks on to a sense of, well, I deserve this.

I should have this. Again, I remember the story of two friends that met up. And one of them said to the other, you don't look very happy. He said, well, no. He said, I got this letter about a month ago from a solicitor that I don't know about a family member that I'd never even heard of.

A distant relative. And it's taken them years to trace me. But apparently this distant relative has just recently died. He said, I'm sorry to hear that.

[ 7 : 25 ] He said, yeah, well, apparently they were quite rich. And, well, they chose to leave me. Well, they chose to leave me £100,000. Wow. And you'd never met them before?

No. Well, I'm sorry to hear of the bereavement there, even though you'd never actually met them before. But, you know, you're £100,000 up a month ago. He said, yeah, well, that's not the end of the story.

He said, well, what else has happened? Well, two weeks later, I get another letter from a different solicitor. You wouldn't believe this. From another relative that I'd never even heard of, who has also recently died.

I said, yeah, what happened? He said, well, it turns out that they were even richer. I said, really? He said, they've left me half a million pounds. Wow. He said, sorry, I don't quite understand.

You've had these two letters over the last month. Why are you looking so upset? He said, well, two weeks have passed and I haven't had anything this week. That sense of entitlement can be a real reality.

[ 8 : 33 ] When we receive anything for long enough, we start to feel entitled to it. Think about that for a moment.

Think about what that might mean and what that might look like in your own life. When you have been received of something for long enough, it becomes absorbed. You begin to feel that it's part of you, that almost it's part of your definition that, well, that's been mine.

It always has been mine and therefore I'm entitled to it. If we have something long enough, entitlement can set in. Of course, on the other hand, there is, I'm just trying to paint this picture of this drive that exists as part of human nature towards accumulation of wealth and stuff.

There's what we could just call plain old fashioned selfishness. I think it was years ago, one of the broadsheets said, write in, write in to, in response to this question, what is wrong with the world? Huge wide open question. And I think, don't quote me, I think it was GK Chesterton. It was somebody like that, if it wasn't GK Chesterton. I think it was GK Chesterton, wrote in and said, sir, you ask, what is wrong with the world?

[ 9 : 54 ] The answer is, I am. That biblical claim that there is nobody who is perfect, that every single one of us falls short of the glory of God.

It's so powerfully true. There is within all of us that selfish instinct. And if we deny it, then we are just denying reality.

There is something within every human being that has ever lived, except for Jesus, because Jesus is God and human. But within every single human being that has ever lived, there is within us that

bias, even though, even though we know what is right.

And even though we know what is the right thing to do and what is good and what is real and what is true. No matter how much we know what the right course of action may be, it doesn't take away that instinct, that drive in us to just go for the self.

What the Bible calls sin. Sin is not so much the stuff that we do, but rather the thing that exists within the human heart. That drive, that drive for the self.

[11:13] And where such motives are self-centered, Jesus is quite blunt about this in this parable. You see, the rich fool in this parable that he tells wouldn't see beyond his own little world.

Let me just read back the parable itself. And just take note of how many times I or my or mine or myself occur.

They actually occur more times than in any other parable that Jesus told. Listen to this. He told them this parable. The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest.

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 my surplus grain. And I will say to myself, you have plenty of grain laid up for many years.

[12:25] Take life easy. Eat, drink and be merry. Or get the message translation or message paraphrase, if you like, of this passage.

Then he told them this story. The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. He talked to himself, what can I do? My barn isn't big enough for this harvest.

Then he said, here's what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods. And I'll say to myself, self, you've done well.

You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life. One commentator says, there's just too much ego in this guy's cosmos.

We should all confront ourselves with that question. With that challenge. How much does the I, the me and the my come up within our own thought patterns?

[13:39] All of us, whoever we are and wherever we are and whenever we are, need to be tuned into that. But especially when we live in an affluent town, where affluence is normalized.

But there is another form of that drive behind money. There's selfishness. There can be that sense of wanting to impress. There can be a sense of self-entitlement and all of that.

But I want to suggest that perhaps there's something else that is part of our humanity still, which may not necessarily be to do with being selfish as such. And may not really necessarily even be to do with greed or anything like that.

Where perhaps we might not consider ourselves at all materialistic. But nevertheless, there's something of that drive that lies within us, which I think Jesus is trying to talk into.

Sorry, Jesus is talking into when he tells this parable. And that has to do not so much with greed or selfishness, but with fear.

[14:56] And it's important to name that because it's an important part of understanding our human brokenness. You see, money promises security and peace of mind.

And it's not necessarily selfish or greedy to pursue those things. But we need to be aware of whether those things motivate us to pursue money and to turn to money rather than God.

Or to try to turn to money before we turn to God. Let's just try and understand that a little bit more. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith said, Money ranks with love as man's greatest joy.

And money ranks with death as his greatest source of anxiety. Money anxiety has been described as a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind.

If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained. Does that resonate? If we don't have enough, we worry about how we're going to get it.

[16:21] If we have plenty, we worry about whether it's really enough and how to hang on to it. So it's little wonder why Jesus did actually talk so much about the subject of money.

In fact, he talked more about it than anything else. If Jesus was a preacher in a church today, his congregation would be saying, Why does that guy never stop talking about money? There's nothing wrong with seeking peace of mind and security.

Except that when we find it's money rather than God that we go to for that peace of mind and security. And as such, there's a sense in which money is God's biggest rival.

Because the things it claims to promise are the very things that Jesus promises. Peace of mind, security. And if we are in that place of worry, we need to take note that this parable, after Jesus tells this parable, is when Jesus then goes on to talk about worrying in the broader sense.

Because after he finishes this by saying, this is how it will be for whoever stores up things for themselves, but is not rich towards God. He says, Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or about your body, what you will wear.

[ 17 : 48 ] For life is more than food and the body is more than clothes. Consider the ravens. They do not sow or reap or they only have a storeroom or barn, but God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than the birds.

Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? And so Jesus goes on and says, Do not worry. Jesus forbids anxiety.

Now, generally speaking, if we are worried, and we are talking about this like the somebody, and somebody else turns around to us and says, Oh well, don't worry. That can feel flippant, can't it? In fact, if you are really anxious about something, and somebody's response, having told them that you are worried about something, and they turn around and say, Oh well, I shouldn't worry. It can be about the worst thing you can possibly hear.

Because it sounds like they are trivialising things, like they are not taking it seriously. So when Jesus turns around and says, Don't worry. You know, you could think to yourself, Well, Jesus clearly has not read the pastoral care manuals.

[ 19 : 00 ] Jesus, though he is fully human, is fully God. So when we hear Jesus turn around and say, You are not to worry.

Do not worry. Do not worry. Do not worry. Repeatedly. We need to hear that not merely as a human voice, but as the word of God.

And there is, carries that objectivity, that power, to cut through everything else, when we hear that this is not just human wisdom.

This is not just good old fashioned common sense. This is not philosophy. This is the living word of the living God, who says, Do not worry.

Jesus says instead, Be rich towards God. He says, This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves, but is not rich towards God.

[ 20 : 10 ] And then he goes on to talk about not worrying. So, it would seem that it would make sense for us to latch on to, what does it mean, therefore, to be rich towards God?

One, because Jesus says, This is how we are to approach life, rather than attaching ourselves onto money and to possessions. But two, it would seem that being rich towards God would seem to be the basis of everything that Jesus then goes on to say about do not worry.

So therefore, if we can become rich towards God, whatever that means, maybe, just maybe, that is what Jesus might be saying to us about impractical terms dealing with worry.

I share this with you, not as somebody who has felt, I've got this sorted. I'm one of life's worriers. And I've time and time and time and time and time again, you will probably hear me say that.

But as somebody who is very much a work in progress, I find this the most powerful thing. that it's God's living word and not human wisdom that says do not worry.

[ 21 : 34 ] And it is God's living word that invites us to be rich towards God. So what might that mean? I just want to share this one thing with you as we then move into a time of prayer.

Our emotions are connected so much with what goes on in our brain, with the whole neural network and everything that's kind of happening, the way we think, the way that the body then transmits all of that to the body, so that the brain transmits that to the rest of the body.

The emotions that we feel and the physical sensations that we experience in our body, when you know if you're really worried, you can feel uptight, you can feel it in your legs, you can feel it in your arms, it can keep you awake at night, you can feel sick, you can feel all of those different things. So, you know, when we're thinking about any kind of emotion, understanding what's going on in the brain is so important. But certain neural pathways are shaped and formed different ways, depending on those habits of thought.

And in recent years, neuroscientists have discovered that there are certain neural pathways that can be formed and shaped. They call it neuroplasticity.

[ 23 : 01 ] And what was actually instinctively kind of understood by, in psychology 50, 60 years ago, in more recent years with scanning technologies, have actually made it possible for

neuroscience to actually demonstrate as a physical reality.

One of those things that has come to light is that it would seem that it is actually impossible for the human brain to be intensely anxious and intensely grateful at the same time.

And the reason for that is because we're talking about the same neural pathways. And if that neural pathway is actively grateful and in an intensive way, there is no space, there is no room for the intense anxiety.

Now, this is very much work in progress and it's very much an area that is still, we're learning more and more each year. But should it really surprise us that 2,000 years ago, in scripture, we find in different ways, over and over again being told, do not be anxious, but always be thankful.

Give thanks in all circumstances. The importance of gratitude and being rich towards God. And so what I want to suggest is we move into a time of prayer now.

[ 24 : 43 ] Is that we move into a time of thanksgiving. But not just as something as we pray, but something to take in to this coming week and whatever you've got going on in your life right now.

And maybe you're not feeling particularly worried about anything right now, that's great. But you know, there's always room for more gratitude. But what I'd like to suggest is maybe, just maybe, if we can focus our thinking and our thought patterns more on those things for which we are to be thankful before God.

Then as Paul says, we may be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord God, as we come before you to pray, we do so as we are, because we can come no other way. And you know everything about us, even more than we do.

You know all about our selfish instincts. You know all about whether it's, whether our motives and our instincts are to do with trying to impress others or a sense of entitlement or whether it's just the selfish bias within our humanity.

[ 26 : 17 ] Lord, you also know about our human longing human longing for peace and for security. And Lord, you know all about us when we seek that reassurance in material things and in financial means rather than in you.

So Lord, first, let's just lay all of that before you and say that we are sorry. Ask for your forgiveness. Lord, we thank you that in Jesus, you come and you meet with us right where we are.

And you meet with us in our anxiety. So Lord, thank you that we can know that we are forgiven.

Thank you that we can know that we are forgiven. Thank you that we can know that you love us and that you will always love us and you have the most amazing future for us for all eternity.

Lord, in our prayer now, we take just a few moments to bring before you our gratitude.

[ 27 : 37 ] So in the prayer, let's each one of us now just think about some things. Might be really basic, simple things but things that we are thankful for now.

We might have to dig a bit deep if we are not feeling in a great place right now but just think about some of those basic things that you can be thankful for. Go for it.

Go for it. Holy Spirit, as we bring before you things that we are grateful for and we continue to do that for a few more moments that will inspire us to be able to bring to the surface those things that we are really thankful for.

Lord, cultivate in us that sense of thanksgiving and gratitude and appreciation such that our focus may be on you.

Not just now, not just when we are gathered in a place of worship but throughout the week as we face whatever decisions that we face may we know that you are Lord and you only are God.

[ 28 : 56 ] our God. In Jesus name we pray and we give you thanks. Amen.