

Store up the right treasure

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from Luke chapter 12 verse 13 to 21. Someone in the crowd said to him, 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. Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. And 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.

[1 : 04] And I'll say to myself, You have plenty of grain 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 whoever stores up things for themselves, But is not rich towards God. Don Draper, In the TV series Mad Men, He says, We're flawed because we want so much more.

And we're ruined because we get these things and wish for what we had. As an advertising executive, Draper knows very well that so much in the world is designed to make us want more.

To design to focus us on what we do not have. To sell us on the idea that if I just had this one thing, I would be truly happy. And so we spend.

[2 : 17] And we work in order to spend. And we lose the things that are truly important in life.

Including that which would make us actually happy. So on the one hand, We have this world that pushes us to want ever more.

Because money buys happiness. And then on the other hand, We have a situation where we don't think God really has anything much to say about money. Or about how we handle it.

To suggest that Jesus cares about how we use our money is a strange idea. Because so often God exists in this box over here. And my money and my possessions, They exist in this box over here.

And there is a gulf between them. In this section of Luke's Gospel that we're focusing on today, Jesus shows us that actually he cares a great deal about what we do with our money.

About our attitude to our finances. Because Jesus claims authority over all of life. Not just this little section over here, One day in seven.

[3 : 21] But claims authority over everything that we do, Day by day and moment by moment. Now, the parable in today's passage is fairly straightforward.

We've got a brief introduction in verses 13 to 15. And then the parable illustrates the point that Jesus makes. We can summarise in verse 15. Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.

Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. And the parable isn't terribly hard to understand, is it? This man is already rich. And then he has a further abundant harvest.

He needs more storerooms. So, reasonably enough, he decides to build them. So far, so good. Problem comes in verse 19. When this man says to himself, You have plenty of grain 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.

[4 : 22] Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? And at least to some extent we cheer, don't we? Because most of us don't think of ourselves as rich.

And so we rejoice that this selfish man got what he deserved. We celebrate the downfall of such a man, I suspect. And at least to some extent, rightly so. And verse 21 returns to the theme of verse 15, putting an even finer point on it.

This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves, but is not rich towards God. Focus on God, not on material wealth.

It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Now, folks, I don't know. Maybe it's because neither growing up nor now, I've never been in a situation where I'd come anywhere close to thinking myself rich.

But so far, this doesn't sound like much of a caution that I need to hear. I don't feel like this is me. And I suspect that's true for many, if not most of you.

[5 : 33] I suspect if we think this parable has relevance to us today, it's actually more so that we can point the finger at other people, not because we feel the finger pointed at ourselves.

However, having spent a bit of time considering this passage, it seems to me there are a couple of points that we'd do well to pick up on that I suspect will cut a little closer to home for many of you, as they have for me.

Firstly, it is not about the money. It's about the attitude. The problem with the man isn't that he asks about an inheritance in verse 13.

The problem is the reason why he does so. The problem with the farmer isn't that he's rich, isn't that he had a good harvest. The problem is what he does with it.

The Bible does say there are dangers in wealth, but I think that lies primarily in the fact that the wealth tends to perpetuate and accentuate dangerous attitudes that can exist independent of particular wealth.

[6 : 37] Do you see what verse 15 says? Be on your guard against greed. And that, I suggest, is a caution that we all need to hear.

Because rich or poor, we are all of us inclined by our corrupt hearts to want what we do not have. To wish that we had more than we do.

From the beggar desperate for some loose change through to the millionaire CEO buying and selling companies, it's a rare person who does not want more than they have.

See, we forget that life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. And either we delight in our possessions, and like the farmer, we think we'll sit back and take it easy. Or we're fixated on what we do not have, but that we tell ourselves we need.

The things we believe would result in a happy life. Now, we don't know whether the man in verse 13 was rich and wanting to build up his estate, or whether he was poor and depending on this inheritance to feed his family.

[7 : 43] We don't know his circumstances, and we don't need to know. Because what we do know is that he has crossed the line into greed. Greed is profoundly dangerous.

It's far more so than perhaps we are inclined to credit. Ryle says, We don't know which is the most common sin in the world, but that covetousness is perhaps that towards which our hearts are most prone.

It was covetousness that led to the downfall of the angels in heaven itself. It was covetousness that captured Adam and Eve's hearts in the garden and prompted them to want something they did not have.

It was covetousness that has led to misery and war and quarrels and divisions and hatred throughout history ever since that first sin.

And that greed is what the farmer in the parable exemplifies. Because the problem isn't the abundant harvest. Because there are two different ways to respond to such a harvest.

[9 : 01] Two different attitudes to have towards riches. Verses 17 through 19, there's a repeated focus on me, on myself, on what I will do, that points to the selfishness in this man's heart.

But he is not thinking about how he might use his wealth wisely. Now this man is only interested in his own comfort.

He just wants to sit back and take life easy. And he could have thought to himself, he could have thought, I'll build bigger barns to store my crops, and then I'll be able to help anyone who has a bad harvest in the next few years.

But he can't even be bothered to keep working in hope of another good harvest next year. Now he looks around, he thinks, I'm secure. I don't need to worry.

All I need to do is keep what I've got safe, and I can take it easy. He is not concerned to use his wealth wisely. He's not interested in serving God.

[10:02] He's not interested in helping other people. He can't even be bothered to have an actually genuinely richer, fuller life. He's only interested in self-indulgence. And as he's sitting there of an evening, relaxing after a nice big meal, glass of whiskey in hand and feet up in front of the fire, as he sits there, thinking everything is as it should be, that all is right in his world, as he sits in this stupor of uncaring self-indulgence, there comes the lightning bolt of verse 20.

You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. You fool! How could you waste your life this way? You fool!

How could you be so self-indulgent? And this idea, this idea that this man is a fool, this is not just a throwaway term.

This is not used lightly. This term of fool is used in the Old Testament sense of the one who rejects the knowledge of God as the basis for life. Friends, this man does not think of God.

He does not consider what God's word would suggest that he do with his wealth. He does not consider God at all. And these carefully stored up goods are no longer of any value whatsoever.

[11:23] He is faced with an abundant harvest. The wise man would have invested sensibly to have another good harvest next year, not just sat there with his feet up.

The wise man would have thought about how to be a blessing to others, whether that means giving away right now to those in need, or maybe still building those barns so that he can offer a safety net for years to come.

The wise man even. The wise man would have recognised a danger in this abundant harvest. And not just of making himself a target for robbers, though there is that, but worse, he would have recognised the danger to his heart.

The wise man would see the danger of greed and selfishness. But it's exactly to that danger that he succumbs, as he chooses the path of folly, not the path of wisdom.

And see, these two different responses. These responses are still available to us all, however much, however little we do or don't have.

[12:27] I may not count myself rich, but I still have the option with what I do have to either hoard it up for myself and eat and drink and be merry, or to be generous with what I have.

Friends, this is something we absolutely must consider for ourselves. Now, we may not suddenly have a fourfold harvest, but most of us will, from time to time, have unexpected financial windfalls, whether it's the tax refund that you didn't see coming, the unexpected generosity of a relative, the raise at work, the Christmas bonus, even down to the small scale of children and given a few pounds as a birthday present.

We have these unexpected things, and we still have to ask, how will we respond to those circumstances? Will we blow it all on easy living?

Will we invest it wisely for the future? Will we overflow with generosity? Will we be wise or foolish? What will we do with our resources?

We may not want to call it riches. It may not be quite an abundant harvest, but we still must consider how we are to use it. And friends, we do that in the light of verse 21, that shows us the utter futility of hoarding our possessions for the sake of an easy life.

[13:56] This is how it will be, with whoever stores up things for themselves, but is not rich toward God. Friends, this passage challenges our priorities, doesn't it?

And I think we might legitimately extend, apply Jesus' point by saying, this is how it will be with whoever, anything at all, but is not rich towards God.

This passage calls us to get our priorities straight, to prioritise what truly matters, to prioritise that which will have eternal significance, because you do not know when your life will be demanded from you.

Maybe for you, maybe it's not so much money. Maybe for you it's time. Maybe it's time that you resent giving to other people. Maybe it's time that you refuse to be generous with. Maybe some of us, maybe some of us, were those who found that lockdown, for whatever reason, gave us an abundance of time on our hands, all of a sudden.

Well, maybe we'd do well to look back and to reflect on what we did with that time. Friends, did you use it wisely? Or in your folly, did you fritter it away?

[15 : 12] And if you are right now rich in time, or if you will be if we end up in a second lockdown, if you are rich in time, even if not in money, friends, are you not also accountable to God for what you will do with your time?

Will you not invest that in such a way that you may be rich toward God? Friends, rich or poor, in material possessions or in less tangible matters, this parable challenges our greed and our selfishness.

It's not about the money. Secondly, I suggest we benefit from looking a little deeper at this parable in considering Jesus' role. Back up in verse 13, Jesus is addressed as teacher.

And then in verse 14, he asks who appointed him to be a judge or arbiter and refuses to adjudicate in the matter of this inheritance claim. Did you notice that, by the way? That the man doesn't actually get what he wants.

And it's not because he was making an unreasonable request. It would be a perfectly normal thing to ask the rabbis to arbitrate in these kinds of matters to adjudicate on how the Torah applies to a particular situation.

[16 : 28] And we don't know whether this man's brother had agreed to abide by the ruling, but it's not an unreasonable request. So why does Jesus respond the way he does?

Why does Jesus refuse this role of judge? Well, it's at least in part because Jesus is interested in something more significant. He knows that this man's heart attitude is more important than whether or not he gets a share of the inheritance.

Remember, we were thinking about something similar last week, weren't we? Last week we said, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say if you're on trial for your life. But we said those words might not be the ones that lead to your acquittal, but rather will certainly be those which lead to God's greater glory.

Well, here, here Jesus will surely answer this man's request. But it may not be an answer that addresses his presenting issue. Rather, it will be the answer he actually needs, an answer for the good of his soul, not the good of his wallet.

So Jesus doesn't directly answer the question of the inheritance. But I'm not sure I'm right to say that he refuses the role of judge. Maybe it looks that way at first, but Jesus does take up the role of judge, of divider, which is the idea behind the term arbiter.

[17 : 54] Jesus is going to more pointedly pick up the idea of division down at the end of chapter 12, and we'll come to that in due course. But we already see that in fact Jesus is a judge.

He judges not so much the case, but the people. He judges the heart. It's implicit in his response, isn't it? Verse 15, be on your guard against all kinds of greed.

Jesus' judgment is that this man's heart is consumed by greed. John records that Jesus knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

And Jesus' recognition of this man's greed is one instance of that knowledge. And on the basis of knowing this man, he judges. Friends, he comes not to judge people's disagreements, but people themselves.

And he claims that same right today. He remains the judge of all humanity. Matthew records Jesus saying that when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

[19 : 07] All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will judge. He will divide.

He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. And the reality of this coming judgment, it shows the folly of accumulating material possessions.

Earthly riches are transient. We die and leave them behind. Christ will return in his power and they will be irrelevant. These things seem vital here and now and yet ultimately are a passing vapor.

This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves that is not rich toward God. See, Jesus' opinion of the man asking for this divided inheritance, Jesus' opinion is clear in this verse.

This man is not rich towards God. He has chosen the path of folly. His opinion of this man is clear. Friends, what is his opinion of you?

[20 : 29] Let's pray. Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus, thank you that you are clear in what you have said.

Thank you that you call us to recognize what is important, what is essential in this life. Lord Jesus, we are sorry when we focus on our riches in this life, when we store things up for ourselves and we are not rich towards you.

Lord Jesus, transform our hearts, we ask. Give us hearts that are passionate for your glory and your praise. Hearts that seek first your kingdom.
Hearts that seek to honor you in all that we do. Lord Jesus, be glorified in our lives, we ask, because we love you. Because we want to see you triumph.
Because we want to see you sitting enthroned over all creation. because we recognize that the day will come when you will judge, when you will divide.
[21 : 44] Lord Jesus, make us rich in preparation for that day. Amen.