

How to make a failure of success

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[0 : 00] The Bible reading is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 12, verses 13-21. This can be found on page 1049.

Luke 12, starting at verse 13. Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, The land of a rich man produced plentifully.

And he thought to himself, what shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones. And there I will store all my grain and my goods.

And I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, fool, this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?

So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God. Jenny, thanks very much for reading for us.

[1 : 35] Please do keep Luke's Gospel open, or open it again if you've closed it, on page 1049, Luke chapter 12. Now imagine the scene.

It was the retirement party of the year, held in a glittering venue with fantastic panoramic views across the city of London. He'd been to one of the best universities, achieved top marks in his professional exams, was one of the youngest ever to be made a partner in the firm.

And over the years, he had reaped the rewards of success, such that he could now retire at the age of 55. As he admires the views across the city, he thinks to himself, life has been good.

A fabulous house in the right part of London. A large pension pot that will secure his income stream for many years. He's looking forward to spending more time with his wife and family, enjoying the fruits of his labour as he divides his time between London and the south of France.

Yes, he says, life's been good. I've done well for myself. There is ample stood up for the future. The next thing he knows, a searing pain ripping through his chest.

[3 : 02] And he is dead before the medics. Arrive. The following week, there's an obituary in the Times. There's a memorial service attended by influential city people with moving appreciations.

And yet there is another verdict which no one heard. God's verdict. And what was God's verdict? You fool.

It's a shocking story, isn't it? But actually it's just the story we hear from the lips of Jesus Christ here in Luke chapter 12.

I guess it's shocking because he's the kind of person we look at and say, yes, you've been successful. But God says, you fool.

He's the kind of person we look at their life and we say, do you know, you've got everything so right. And yet God's verdict is, no, you've got everything so wrong.

- [4 : 05] And I simply want to ask this morning, how could that be possible? It's the title of today's talk. How to make a failure of success.
- I want us to think in the next few moments about the two tragic mistakes that this man made.
- First of all, he lived as if there's no God. He lived as if there's no God. Have a look again at verses 20 and 21. But God said to him, fool, this night your soul is required of you.
- And the things you've prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God. It's interesting, isn't it?
- We're not really told very much about this man. We don't know whether he was good or bad, industrious or lazy, a faithful husband or a womanizer, religious or secular. We simply don't know. I know big questions, but actually Luke doesn't tell us.
- [5 : 10] All we know from the last sentence is that he was not rich towards God. I guess he may have acknowledged God's existence in some way. He may have been a churchgoer.
- But he ignored God in terms of his day-to-day life. And that is the thing that tipped the balance. You see, he lives his life as if God isn't there.
- Have a look again at verses 16 and 17. Jesus told them a parable saying, The land of a rich man produced plentifully. And he thought to himself, What shall I do if I have nowhere to store my crops?
- Well, it's a happy problem to have, isn't it? And he comes up with a solution. Verse 18. I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones.
- And there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, and be merry.
- [6 : 09] And God doesn't get a look in. He's not mentioned once. Indeed, I think it's the most striking thing about this story that Jesus told.
- It's the repetition of I. And what I will do. As he plans his life around himself and what he wants, God doesn't get a look in.
- I guess it's a common mistake, isn't it? To live as if God isn't there. But it's also foolish. Because God really is there.
- It's why the Bible says elsewhere, The fool has said in his heart, There is no God. Because God is there. And he has revealed himself.
- It's at the heart of what the Bible calls sin, To live as if God isn't there. We hear the word sin. I guess we perhaps immediately think of the front page of the tabloid newspapers.
- [7 : 07] And we say to ourselves, Well, it's other people who are sinners. But actually, Jesus Christ says we all are. It's the diagnosis that applies to all of humanity.
- That shows what's wrong with humanity. It's not just angry atheists like Richard Dawkins who are sinners, Who live as if God isn't there. No, it's the wise investor, as we might call him in our story as well.
- It's all of us, As we live our lives without any meaningful reference to God. But you say, how do you know God is there?
- Well, because he's made himself known. Jesus Christ was God on earth. Fully man, fully God. If you and I have been alive in the first century, In what is now the state of Israel, We could have seen him.
- We could have heard him. We could have touched him. But we say, wasn't Jesus just a religious leader, a good teacher? No. In fact, it's the very mistake that the other man makes.

[8 : 12] The one who asks Jesus the question in the first place. Verse 13, someone in the crowd said to him, Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. But he said to him, Man, who made you a judge or arbiter over you?

Do you see, he treats Jesus as if he's this kind of petty judge in the small claims court. And yet Jesus is so much greater. He claimed to be God. He demonstrated to have the power of God on earth.

He calmed a storm that was terrifying, even hardened fishermen. He healed the blind, the deaf, the mute, the lame. He fed 5,000 people with just a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread.

He walked on water. He raised the dead. In all these things, you see Jesus Christ, the creator, demonstrating his complete mastery over his world, over the world he has made.

In other words, God is not playing hide and seek. We're a bit beyond that in our household. But it's a terrific game with younger children.

[9 : 21] And I'm sure it's one that Nick and Claudia are anticipating eagerly in the years to come. You know, as you count to ten, and you can already, as you're counting to ten, hear the squeals of delight from behind the curtains.

And then, as you ask, are you behind the sofa? And again, squeals of delight. And the answer from behind the curtains, no. But God, you see, is not playing hide and seek that we have to go and look for him.

Nor is God some kind of impersonal power or force such that he cannot communicate. No, he's come to earth. He's made himself fully known in the person of Jesus Christ.

Which means, of course, that to read about Jesus in the Gospels, as we are this morning, is to see God in action. It means to read, to hear the words of Jesus, as we have done this morning, is to hear the voice of the living God.

As such, of course, it exposes the lies of our culture. Because the other mistake the man in the crowd makes is there in verse 15. As Jesus says to him, notice, For one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions.

[10 : 49] In other words, this man, he's a kind of living demonstration, if you like, of how to miss the point of life. Life is not like some TV game show in which the person who has the most wins.

It's the mistake the rich man in the story that follows makes as well. From a human perspective, I guess we might say, Michael, he does everything right. He doesn't squander his wealth on the celebrity lifestyle.

He doesn't gamble it away. In many ways, he is a wise investor. And yet, from God's perspective, he is a fool. You see, I wonder how we think about success.

I wonder how we define success for ourselves. Perhaps it's about achieving the expectations of others. Parental expectations.

Family expectations. The expectations of friends. Colleagues. I guess in our little corner of London, there are very clear markers, aren't there, of success.

[11 : 56] Getting the right exam results. Going to the right university. Securing the right job. Living in the right postcode. Getting our children into the right schools. And all the time, a pension pot quietly accumulating in the background.

And Jesus says you can have all of that and more. And have made a complete failure of your life. A complete failure of success.

Now notice, really, what Jesus is and isn't saying. He's not saying success is bad. I guess some of us perhaps have a kind of view of God which rather imagines him to be like a sort of strict school teacher.

And, you know, whenever we begin to enjoy ourselves, he says, stop it. God, the cosmic spoils sport. But, no, God is the creator. His creation is here for us to enjoy.

Indeed, there are plenty of people in the Bible who are successful. No, the problem of success isn't that it's bad. The problem of success is that it blinds.

[13 : 00] It blinds us to what is important in life. It causes us to miss out on what really matters. That's the first way to make a failure of success.

To live as if God isn't there. The second way to make a failure of success is to live as if there is no judgment to come. To live as if there is no judgment to come.

Have a look again at verses 20 and 21. But God said to him, fool, this night your soul is required of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?

So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God. You see, ultimately, he failed to understand that his life is not his own. Rather, it's something for which all of us have to give an account.

And so, although he plans for the future, he plans carefully for the future, the tragedy is he doesn't plan far enough into the future. He doesn't plan for the judgment.

[14 : 08] I guess you may have believed in the afterlife, we're not told. And yet the fact is he moves out into eternity completely unprepared. And all his wonderful plans for the future are cancelled at a stroke.

Because to lose your soul is to lose everything. What is Jesus saying? Well, clearly, that death is not the end.

And although the idea of a judgment day is unpopular in our culture, just think for a moment about the alternative. The God who doesn't care.

The God who is indifferent to everything that's wrong with our world. And yet the desire for justice that we have, it's so deeply ingrained within each one of us, isn't it?

The outrage that the killers of Stephen Lawrence haven't all been brought to justice and it's taken so long. The scandal at the way the Windrush generation have been treated. The violence on the streets of London in the last few weeks and months.

[15 : 14] The fear that the Grenfell Tower inquiry will be a whitewash. We want governments to act justly and rightly and fairly. And on the final day, don't we want God to act justly and rightly and fairly?

We don't want a God, do we? Surely, who will turn a blind eye, who doesn't care, who will refuse to make a distinction between good and evil. And therefore, the reason Jesus tells this story, why it's a great act of kindness, isn't it?

Because it's a warning. And every warning is an act of kindness. So that we can take action and not make the foolish mistake of living as if there's no judgment.

But you say, how can we know there will be a judgment? Is there anything more concrete simply than this story here? Yes.

Look at the facts of history. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Because Jesus was not simply a figure of history like Julius Caesar or Napoleon who died and that was it.

[16 : 32] Certainly he was a figure of history. But the Bible tells us that after his death, he rose again from the dead, never to die again. Imagine for a moment that this world is like some sort of giant waiting room.

A sort of far, far bigger version of the waiting room at the doctors or something like that. And there is a door marked death at one end of the waiting room.

And in all the tragedies and heartaches of life, as people die, we see young and old, men and women, individuals and groups going through the door all the time, never to return.

And the news this morning of the death of Dame Tessa Jow, a former MP of Dulwich and West Norwood, is simply a reminder, isn't it, of that reality.

What we desperately need, you see, is for someone to come back through the door and tell us. Tell us what's on the other side. Rather like the early explorers when they discovered the new world America for years.

[17 : 42] People have wondered, was there some great land mass out beyond the oceans? And people have gone exploring, never to return.

Until that is, on the day in March 1493, when Christopher Columbus did return. And at that point, there was certainty. Clarity.

And it's the same with death. You and I need an expert. We need someone who's gone through death, out the other side, and is able to tell us, and come back, and tell us what it's all about.

And only one person has done that. Jesus Christ. Which means that God, in his kindness, you see, he has not left us to be guesses, or uncertain, about what happens after death.

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then clearly he's still dead. It would mean there's nothing beyond the grave. And therefore, of course, we'd have to change, wouldn't we, the title of this story that Jesus told.

[18 : 52] Not the parable of the rich fool, but the parable of the wise man. Because that would be, the way he lives, would be the wise way to live.

As the New Testament says elsewhere, if the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Remarkably similar to what this man says in verse 19.

Relax, eat, drink, and be merry. But if Jesus did rise from the dead, never to die again, why, that completely changes everything.

It means he is now Lord and King, that he will return on the final day as the judge of all. And of course it means that death is not the end.

So, what does it mean then to be rich towards God? Well, it certainly doesn't mean buying God off by going to church or giving to charity.

[19 : 56] No, it's about doing what this man failed to do. Recognizing that God is God. Recognizing that we have to give an account.

Recognizing that we all fall short. And then wonderfully turning to Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our sins, for our rejection of God.

The one who took upon himself, as he died, the judgment of God. Such that we might receive the forgiveness of sins and be at peace with God.

Both in this life and supremely in the next. And then to start a new life following Jesus as Lord and King.

Let me finish by addressing three groups of people. Firstly, those who are skeptical. But can you at least see the issue?

[20 : 57] Is Jesus who he says he is? Is he really God? If he is, then I take it we need to take him seriously.

If he isn't, then I take it we can safely ignore him. If you've never really investigated Christianity and done so as a consenting adult, so to speak.

Then the issues at stake are so enormous. Let me put it to you that integrity really does demand that you do investigate. It's why we'd love you to sign up for that Christianity Explore course that's there on the handout that Rupert was telling us about.

Or for the guided read through of one of the Gospels. Second, there will be those of us here this morning who are followers of Jesus already. Notice, will you, that in verses 22 to 34, Jesus applies the lesson of this parable to us.

Verse 22, And he said to his disciples, Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on.

[22 : 11] And verse 30, For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

And verse 34, For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. What is Jesus saying? Don't slip into thinking like the rich fool.

That's bound to be a danger, isn't it, for many of us? Living where we do, earning the kind of salaries that we earn, and of course living in a society where everyone really does live, as if life is about how much stuff you have and accumulate.

Instead, says Jesus, We're to seek God's kingdom first. But then the third group of people, perhaps those who actually identify with this rich man perfectly.

And you're saying to yourself, Yes, I'm living my life for myself. You may be thinking, What a fool I've been. Well, it may well be that the next step for you would be that Christianity Explore course again, or the guided read-through of one of the Gospels.

[23 : 29] But actually, it may well be that you've realized that now is the time to begin to follow Jesus, and to receive the forgiveness that he offers. In which case, I'm going to finish by just praying a prayer that would enable you to do that.

Let me read it through, first of all. And as I read it through, just think to yourself, Is this the kind of prayer that you're ready to pray? And then I will then pray it a second time, so that you can then echo it in the quiet of your own heart.

But this is how the prayer is going to go. Lord God, I'm so sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I understand now who Jesus is and why he died.

I know that I do not deserve it. But because of Jesus' death on the cross for me, I ask you to forgive me. From now on, please give me the desire to obey you and help me to follow Jesus, whatever the cost.

Well, if that is a prayer that you'd like to pray, I'm going to read it out again, and then you can echo it in the quiet of your own heart. Lord God, I am sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength.

[24 : 48] I understand now who Jesus is and why he died. I know that I do not deserve it. But because of Jesus' death on the cross for me, I ask you to forgive me.

From now on, please give me the desire to obey you and to help me to follow Jesus, whatever the cost. Can I say that if you've prayed that prayer for the first time, today is a great day for you.

You can be sure that God has answered. It would be great to tell someone. Why not tell someone here this morning before you leave so that we can make sure you get off to the very best possible start in the Christian life.

God bless him. All right. Thank you. I'll stand there. Let's do this.