

Investing in God's Kingdom

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 July 2020

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] The reading today comes from Luke chapter 12 verses 13 to 21. 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 me a judge or arbitrator over you? And he said to them, Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

And he told them a parable, saying, 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.

[1 : 00] Let's pray together. Psalm 119 Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Your faithfulness endures to all generations.

You have established the earth, and it stands fast. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed, that you are the great creator God, that the world stands firm and fast.

Thank you for the blessing of a new day. And we praise you too, Heavenly Father, that your word is more firmly fixed even, than your creation.

And we pray therefore this morning, we thank you for the privilege we have of hearing your word, and we pray that you would help us to take it to heart, and be transformed by it.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder if you've ever missed out on something, and yet there was no need to miss out on it, because actually you knew it was coming.

[2 : 03] Perhaps it was the flight, you got distracted, you didn't leave enough time to get to the airport. I'm sorry, madam. I'm sorry, sir. The flight has closed. And that gut-wrenching sense of emptiness.

Or perhaps you were going to a play or a concert, and denied entry until the interval. Oh, why didn't we get the earlier train? Or perhaps there was a presentation at work, or an exam at school, and you knew you just weren't quite ready for it.

Well, we're in the middle of a section of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus is warning us that a similar thing can happen with eternity. Thousands of people have gathered to listen to him, and at one level, Jesus is addressing them, those who are looking in, those who are weighing up his claims, just as he is addressing us this morning, if we are in a similar place.

But he's speaking first and foremost to his disciples. We can see that in chapter 12, verse 1, he began to say to his disciples first, and then chapter 12, verse 22, and he said to his disciples, Indeed, it's not until 1254 that he directly addresses the crowds.

It's a section which is heading towards the two parables in Luke 12, verses 35 to 48, both of them about being ready for when Jesus returns.

[3 : 26] Verse 40, You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. And on these three Sundays, as we look at chapter 12, verses 1 to 34, we see some of the things that could mean that we are not ready.

Last week it was hostility, opposition. This week and next, it's possessions, money, a concern for our physical needs, in a sense, just the kind of normal stuff of life.

And yet Jesus shows us how very dangerous they can be, spiritually speaking. So let's think, firstly, about the lie about stuff.

The lie about stuff. Verse 13. Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.

Well, here is someone who we know has blown it from the start. He's been given the opportunity of a lifetime. Here he is. He's got Jesus Christ right in front of him. God himself come down to earth. And if we are to say to Luke, as he writes this careful account of Jesus' life, please will you summarise for me the message of Jesus?

[4 : 38] Luke says it's all about God's kingdom. To belong to his kingdom is to know that your sins are forgiven. It is to have peace with God. There is no greater gift in this world.

There's no greater gift that Jesus can give. And yet this person, rather than asking how he can enter God's kingdom or simply crying out to mercy for Jesus as others do, it's just about the money. He treats Jesus as if he's a judge in a small claims court. Verse 14, He said to him, Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you? Although, of course, there will be a day at the end of history when he will indeed be the judge of all.

Jesus continues, verse 15, take care and be on your guard against all covetousness. For one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions.

In other words, here is a man who has completely missed what life is about. I wonder if it's occurred to you that it's possible to do just that yourself.

[5 : 47] Covetousness. It's a word that's used three times in Luke's Gospel. It speaks of abundance, having more than enough. It's the worldview we swim in.

Life is about the place you live, the designer kitchen you create, the badge on your car, the clothes you wear. It's about the lifestyle you have. It's about educating your children so they will have all those things too.

And because in the first century all your wealth was in possessions, in other words, they didn't have savings pots and pension funds and all that kind of stuff, then I guess we need to include those things as well.

In other words, Jesus has in view here not simply the spenders but the savers. The spenders by possessions, the savers by security.

And it's not just the haves, it's the have-nots because it's not only the rich who covet. If you're on social media, it's just worth asking yourself, what do I communicate on social media, on what I think life is really all about?

[6 : 54] Or if you're someone who writes a Christmas letter to send around with your Christmas cards, what do you communicate your life is really all about? I was talking to someone a while back and it was dawning on them that you can be very successful, you can achieve everything in life that you hope to achieve, you can achieve everything in life that your parents expected you to achieve.

life. But then you can come to the realisation that actually none of those things are what life is all about. And he said to me, it hit me like a train.

What a devastating thing to get to your mid-forties and realise you've missed the point of life. You see, it is a mark of Jesus' great kindness that he shows us that it's possible to do that and be so very wrong about life.

In other words, what's the lie that Jesus exposes? That life does consist of these things. That they are the measure of somebody.

But it doesn't and it isn't. There's more to life than stuff. Which at one level I guess we'd all agree with. But in practice we find it so hard to really take that seriously and believe it.

[8 : 13] We live in a world which regards life like a TV game show. You know, the person with the most stuff wins. Whether it's Bruce Forsyth's Generation Game in the 1970s or whether it's Who Wants to Be a Millionaire with Jeremy Clarkson today.

You know, if only I had an extra £500 or £5,000 or £50,000. If only we could move house. If only I could get that promotion. And again, remember who's on the receiving end of Jesus' teaching.

In other words, verse 15, who are the them that Jesus is addressing? Well, presumably, yes, they're the crowds who are gathering round to listen to Jesus just as we saw in chapter 12, verse 1. Many thousands of people had gathered to listen to him. And as we said earlier, it may well be that you're listening in and in a sense you're part of the crowds. You're interested in Jesus.

You're an onlooker. You're an observer. And yet, the primary focus is Jesus' disciples. 12, verse 1, he began to say to his disciples first.

[9 : 19] So, verse 22, it's his disciples that he primarily applies the parable he's going to tell. Presumably, because Jesus is showing the danger, the danger as his disciples that actually we are no different from people in the world around us that lie about stuff.

Secondly, a case study, the successful fool. Have a look at verses 16 to 20. Let me read them to us. And he told them a parable saying, 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'll do this. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. And there I will store all my grain and my goods.

And I'll say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, and 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?

Well, imagine the scene for a moment. It was the retirement party of the year held in a glittering venue with fantastic views right across the city of London. He'd been to one of the best universities.

[10 : 44] He's achieved top marks in his professional exams. He was one of the youngest ever to be made a partner in the firm. And over the years, he'd reaped the reward of success and was now about to retire at the age of 55.

As he admires those wonderful views out across the city, he says to himself, yes, life's been good. I've done well. There is ample stored up for the future.

The next thing he knows, a pain ripping through his chest. He's dead before the medic arrived.

There's a glowing obituary in the times and yet there's another verdict on his life that no one hears. You fool. Here is someone you see who looks so successful. He looks as if he's got his life so right and yet God's verdict, you fool.

In the Bible, the fool is the atheist. Psalm 14, verse 1 in the Old Testament, the fool says in his heart, there is no God.

[11 : 55] Whereas we think of our heart as the seat of our emotions, in the Bible, the heart is the seat of our decision-making. So this man may well have said that he believed in God.

He may even have been a churchgoer. But in terms of his world view, in terms of his decision-making and his outlook on life, he's a practical atheist.

Notice, will you, he's a fool firstly because he thinks too much about himself. Look again at verses 18 and 19. Then he said, this is what I'll do.

I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. And there I will store all my grain and my goods and I'll say to myself, you have plenty of goods laid up for many years.

Take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry. You see, as he works all this stuff out in his head, God isn't mentioned once. Indeed, it's the most striking thing about the parable, the repetition of my and I, what his plans are, what he's going to do.

[13 : 02] He's a fool because he thinks too much about himself and not enough about God. He makes the terrible mistake of thinking he's in control when actually he's not.

Secondly, though, he's a fool because he thinks too much about the present and not enough about the future. Yes, of course, he thinks about the future in a sense. He's planning for the business, he's planning for his retirement, but all he's thinking about the future, it is woefully, woefully short-term.

He doesn't think about the future that really matters. He's failed to grasp that his life is not his own, that he'll have to give an account, but he'll have to face the judgment.

He's, of course, precisely the kind of person our society admires, and yet the tragedy is he's lost his wealth, and he's lost his eternity.

He's a case study in how to misjudge life very badly indeed. There was an interview last autumn with the actor and director, Alan Alder.

[14 : 12] Over the years, he's played many roles. He's played Arnold Finnick, the presidential candidate in the West Wing, and most recently appeared in Marriage Story. It was a wide-ranging interview, in the course of which he said this, we're going to die, and so it's amazing that most of us live as if it's not going to happen.

Well, it is indeed. J.C. Ryle comments on this parable, we are not to live as if we had nothing but a body. We are to live like beings who have immortal souls to be lost or saved, a death to die, a God to meet, a judgment to expect, and an eternity in heaven or in hell awaiting us.

And although it's very easy if we are followers of Jesus to apply this parable to the world around us, as we said earlier, first and foremost, the Lord Jesus applies it to us.

It's a warning. So we're ready for when Jesus returns, not blinded or distracted by our wealth and possessions, not living for whatever else he's living for.

After all, practically all of us are wealthy, even by the standards of this country, let alone globally. So how can I make sure wealth and the desire for more doesn't turn me into a fool?

[15 : 41] Well, thirdly, we need to grasp the truth about Jesus' kingdom. The truth about Jesus' kingdom. Verse 21.

Jesus says, so is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God. Well, it's the punchline of the story. But what does it mean?

Well, if we're not yet trusting in Jesus, it means a radical change of worldview. This rich fool is an illustration of what the Bible calls sin. In other words, living in God's world, and rather than living with God at the centre of my life, I put myself at the centre.

It's what all of us are by nature like. Indeed, throughout the second half of Luke's gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will die on the cross for the forgiveness of sins.

That forgiveness and peace with God is at the very heart of Luke's message. And yet it's not automatic. It has to be received.

[16 : 48] Jesus tells us to respond in repentance and faith, putting our trust in him, following him as one of his disciples. If you've never done that, don't ignore the warning of the rich fool.

But the implications of verse 21 are rather different for those who are already Jesus' disciples, as the following verses make clear. Just glance down, verses 22 to 31, Jesus tackles the anxiety, the worry, that can cause us to be spiritually foolish with money and wealth, and we'll come back to that next week.

But then in verses 32 to 34, he picks up again on this idea of treasure. Just have a look at those verses.

Verse 32, fear not, fear not, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with money bags that do not grow old, with treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Notice, firstly, we are to value Jesus' kingdom.

[18 : 08] Verse 32, fear not, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. To have been given the kingdom is to have been given the blessings of the kingdom, to have received the forgiveness of sins, to be at peace with God, the certainty of belonging to Jesus' kingdom now, but also the certainty of being part of that kingdom into eternity.

Imagine for a moment a child coming home from school in the days that is when they physically went to school. They're hungry, they're weary, I'm starving, is there anything to eat?

Well, you can have a biscuit. A biscuit? Isn't there anything else? Something other than a biscuit? Perhaps two biscuits? I'll tell you what, let's go out for an ice cream.

So you head off to O'Donnell's in East Dulwich, mine will be a pistachio, please. And as you're sitting down savouring the ice cream, all talk about biscuits has completely disappeared.

Because the ice cream is so much better. After all, who fusses about biscuits when they're enjoying an ice cream? Anxiety about material wealth, success, security and possessions, the constant striving for more, we want them.

[19 : 32] Just like the child wants that biscuit. And yet they pale into insignificance once we grasp how wonderful is the gift of God the Father, the gift of his kingdom.

But secondly, Jesus makes it clear that the hallmark of valuing his kingdom is that we train our hearts. Verses 33 34.

Sell your possessions and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. I wonder if you can see the principle. The principle, I think, is very straightforward.

And that is the things that we treasure, the things that we invest our time and energy in, those things train and shape our hearts.

[20 : 33] Just have a look at the two diagrams on the outline. I wonder which one you think is correct, perhaps instinctively which one feels right. The first diagram, in other words, if my heart is

in a good place, and if I'm right with the Lord, then my treasure and my wealth will be put to good use.

Or the second diagram. In other words, if my treasure and wealth are being put to good use, if I'm serving the Lord with those things, then my heart is going to be in the right place.

Which of those two instinctively feels right? Now, the first one sounds logical, doesn't it? But Jesus knows us better than that.

The human heart is deceitful above all things. It's not my heart that shapes my attitude towards my possessions and wealth. It's my possessions and wealth that shapes my attitude to my heart.

In other words, store up your treasure on earth, do what everyone else is doing with that treasure, and it will pull your heart in the direction of the world. store it in heaven, use it for Jesus' kingdom, and it will pull your heart and with it your goals and ambitions towards heaven and towards the work of Jesus' kingdom.

[22 : 00] Invest your time, energy, dreams in a beautiful home. Your heart will follow. Invest your time, energy, passions in your career or being successful or producing successful children.

Your heart will follow. invest your energy and dreams in an easy life, whether holidays or retirements, your heart will follow. You see, it's a question of what we are ambitious for.

It's possible to call yourself a disciple, and yet rather than serving Jesus' kingdom, we invest ourselves in other things and train our hearts to do so more and more.

And Jesus is saying that is a very dangerous place to be because of the way in which we are training our heart. I wonder if you're convinced of that.

Or are you thinking to yourself, well, I can see this may be an issue for some other people I can think about, but it's not an issue for me. Don't be deceived.

[23 : 09] What do you say? What's the answer? Well, the answer is verse 33. Sell your possessions and give to the needy.

Provide yourselves with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. What's Jesus saying?

Very simply, he's saying, teach your heart a lesson. In other words, we are to redirect our resources in such a way that our hearts are trained.

Think of an illustration. Imagine for a moment that you are contemplating a home extension. It's what everyone else seems to do around here. And yes, I guess you may be able to think to yourself, well, it might increase the value of the house.

You might even be able to persuade yourself and others, possibly, that actually you're doing it to serve the Lord Jesus. You'll be able to be more hospitable and so on. But before you get on and sign the contracts, just think to yourself, how do you want to train your heart?

[24 : 22] Might it be better actually to live without the extension? To live in a house which, if you like, is a constant reminder that as a disciple of Jesus, we have something far more valuable than a home extension.

And to use the money for gospel purposes instead. And to train your heart to value that. And if you're a smug saver, rather than a spender, then you'll have to think of what the equivalent is for you.

Train your heart by investing in Jesus' kingdom, rather than buying future security. Can we see what Jesus is saying? Just think of the time that we spend training our bodies, you know, a good diet, a fitness regime and so on.

Or the time and energy we spend training our minds, perhaps doing a crossword or a sudoku or reading books or whatever it is. What about training our hearts?

Let me lead us in prayer. Let's take care and be on your guard against all covetousness. For one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions.

[25 : 44] Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed that you are the creator God, that we are not simply bodies, that we are essentially souls.

We thank you that this world that we see is not all that there is. thank you that there will be an eternity and that the Lord Jesus will return.

And we pray therefore, Heavenly Father, please would you help us to take this teaching of the Lord Jesus to heart. We pray that you would help us to train our hearts such that we would be those who don't simply live as the world around us lives, but lives in the light of Jesus return.

And we ask it in his name. Amen.