

Bp. Dobbs: Luke 12:13-21

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Date: 31 July 2022

Preacher: Julian Dobbs

[0:00] Let us confess our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all days visible and invisible.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God of God, light from light, true God from true God, the begotten not made, of one being with the Father.

Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, for that he died from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified on the puncher's pallet, his upper hand was buried. On the third day he rose again, in the portals of his churches.

[1:11] He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, through the Father and the Son, is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the parts.

We believe in one holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the reason of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the Lord to come.

Amen. Grant, O Lord, now as we open your word, and listen to your Spirit, that you would be our teacher and our guide, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Would you be seated, please? Amen. I'm sure you've noticed in the life of the Church that we rightly talk about the cross, and we talk about the resurrection, and we talk about holiness, and we talk about prayer, and fellowship, and worship, but we're not very good, or at least many of us clergy, are not very good at talking about money.

[2:48] Amen. Very few ministers preach about money, or preach enough about money, and yet, we all do something about money.

Someone once wrote, money isn't the most important thing in life, but it's reasonably close to oxygen. Another person said, they say love is more important than money, but have you ever tried paying your bills with a hug?

We do a lot with money, don't we? If they didn't ask me to speak about money this morning, I'm in fact preaching from the lectionary reading, the reading set aside in our Bible reading schedule, we might call it.

Jesus spoke more about money than almost any other subject except the Kingdom of God. He teaches using 38 parables in the New Testament, in the Gospels.

Sixteen of those parables, in one way or another, have something to do with money. Our Lord gives money startling attention, and it's a subject of great seriousness.

[4:01] It's constantly portrayed in the Bible as God's chief competition for our hearts. It's fairly serious, isn't it?

So it's probably good we talk about it this morning. And Jesus, very clearly in the Sermon on the Mount, uses some rather unsettling words.

He says in Matthew's Gospel, in that portion of the Sermon on the Mount, He says, No one can serve two masters, for he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other.

You cannot, says Jesus, serve God and mammon. Those of you who have slightly gray here than me will be familiar with that word. We grew up with it.

It's an Aramaic term that's used to refer to wealth. And Jesus gives us a powerful spiritual character. He personifies money or mammon as a rival to God.

[5:06] And He makes it unmistakably clear that money is not just some morally mutual medium of exchange we use to lubricate our lives and pay our bills.

It's an active agent. It's out to dominate us, to inspire our devotion, to bid for our affection, to win our hearts.

And in short, money and possessions, mammon, hold extraordinary potency to become a God substitute in each of our lives.

Oh, not in mine, you might say. Bishop, I've got it under control. Well, you might be the only one. Let's remember those figures. Of 38 parables that Jesus uses, 16 of them deal in one way or another with money.

The Apostle Paul spells it out quite clearly as well. He says in his letter to Timothy, the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. He continues, that some eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves of many griefs.

[6:15] So it seems to me that according to the New Testament, whoever you are and what you feel about money will impact your life now and in eternity.

So this is rather serious stuff, isn't it? Say yes, Bishop. It's rather serious stuff. So let's dive in a little bit deeper and have a look at what Jesus has to say. And before we turn to our Gospel passage in Luke chapter 12, just for a few minutes, let me, in a few sentences, capture what appears to me to be the two strands of teaching about money in the Bible.

First of all, money can be a great blessing from God. Can it not? Through money, needs are met. Ministry happens.

Money enriches lives. Money can be an aspect of God's generosity and a powerful provision in the world. And money, as it will be for us today, is part of our worship.

It's part of what we give back to God as we make our offering. And in the Bible, we read about people who had a lot of money. Abraham, he was a wealthy chap, as they would say where I come from.

[7:31] Job, Solomon, Nicodemus, Lydia, Barnabas, they all had incredible wealth. And Jesus allowed wealthy individuals to love him and support his ministry.

Think of Mary from Magdala, who supported Jesus' ministry with her wealth. He associated with these people. He ate with the wealthy, celebrated with the wealthy, at an incredible feast in Cana in Galilee.

He had no problem associating with wealthy people and privileged people. Add to that, teaching all the New Testament says about diligent work and family responsibility and prudent planning and saving and about support for the needy.

It all seems fairly manageable and sensible and comprehensible. So much of what money is can be a blessing from God.

And yet, there is the dark side of money that is so clear in the New Testament. We see it in your rectus choice of rather scary picture on the front of your New Service Bulletin in Fran Franken's Death and a Money Lender.

[8:43] But as I was observing it, I was at one time, not many of you will know this, but I was at one time a student of art history. So I find depictions like this fascinating. Death and the Money Lender on the front page of your Order of Service, if you observe the skeleton, do you see it there?

The depiction of death. One foot is on an hourglass. Do you see that? Do you see that there? As if to say to the Money Lender, my man, time is running short for you.

We might even say to him what? Time is running out. You cannot love God and money is what this says to me. It's a rather chilling image, yes, but oh how true an image for us to consider in light of this morning's story from Jesus.

The love of money can threaten your relationship with God. This is the dark side of money. Yes, it's wonderfully helpful, but it's profoundly hazardous in the New Testament.

And the foundation of Scripture's misgiving about having money and wanting money is that it is an idol competing with Almighty God for our worship.

[10:01] That's what I see here, and that's what I see even more clearly in the New Testament. Statement after statement from Jesus underlines that. He actually says, Woe to you if you are rich.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. And many statements from Jesus fly in the face of all that culture today and that contemporary experience that shouts at us for an abundant life of money and possessions.

I mean, who has not dreamt at times of winning the lottery? What was it that somebody won in a gas station outside Illinois? 1.28 million? Man, that would pay the bills of the church.

Billion, was it? I don't even know how many zeros that is. What would we do with it? How would we spend it? Educate our children by advantage, fly first class.

Oh, that would be nice. Oh my goodness. Who has not felt that money gives us security and control of our lives? But brothers and sisters, when mammon whispers in your ear as it regularly does, you need me, you really do need me for the good life, then we guiltily mutter back, I know, I know, in New Testament terms we are already on a slippery slope towards idolatry.

[11:29] Did the bishop really say that? He did. Because that's what Jesus says here. So let's open our Bibles this morning and take a look at Luke chapter 12.

Let's go into the Bible. Sorry, I forgot the page number. It's 1035 as we have a look at Luke chapter 12. And some of these themes are in our passage here.

There's a clue to the direction of our life's travels a little bit later than our Gospel reading. Look in verse 34. Do you see at the end of this passage where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I made a serious blunder as a young rector one day when preaching on that text and it was printed in the bulletin like yours and we had printed where your treasurer is, there your heart will be also.

So Jim, the treasurer holds a very important place in the life of the church. No, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Where your treasure is, the movement of your money signals, I believe, the movement of your heart.

[12:34] Where your money goes, so too there goes your heart. Your exchange, your exchange money for what you value, your treasure.

Look on again in Luke 12. Jesus is teaching and addressing, we're told, a huge crowd. They're captivated by what he's saying. And look back earlier in the passage, in the chapter, in verses 8 and 9.

Take a look with me if you would. Jesus had some extraordinarily solemn words. He has talked about the implications of disowning him.

It's rather serious, isn't it? If we contemplate that, we might think we would never disown him. Peter disowned him, the disciples disowned him. He's talking about disowning him.

He's urging people to see life through the lens of eternity. It's obviously a very, very serious sermon and very weighty matters. And then, do you notice, in verse 13, amidst all that serious teaching from Jesus, someone in the crowd misses the impact of our Lord's words about eternity because he has money on his mind and he says to Jesus, Teacher, tell my brother to survive the inheritance with me.

[13:50] What Jesus must have been thinking. He's teaching about disowning him. He's teaching about eternity. And somebody says, tell my brother to divide the family well, to sort out the inheritance.

Oh my goodness. Contemplate this for a moment. Everyone who acknowledges me before man, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God.

But the one who denies me before man will be denied before the angels of God. Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance. What planet was this man on?

I mean, honestly, you know, in my former congregation, I have to be careful because this is being recorded this morning, when I served as a rector back in New Zealand, we had just concluded, Brenda, I don't know if you remember this, we had just concluded a very moving, impactful service one Sunday morning.

People were responding with tears. It wasn't because the sermon was that bad, but it was a very moving service. They were responding with tears. I was in tears. A woman came up to me at the end of the service and I expected her to be in tears, responding to what the Spirit of God was doing in our congregation that day.

[15:06] And I leaned into her to listen. And she truly said this, this is what she said to me, Rector, the key in this church is disgusting. And I wanted to say to her, where have you been for the last 90 minutes?

And that's the sort of thing that was going on here. Disown me and you'll be disowned before the Son of Man. Tell them to divide the money.

That's what was going on here. And Jesus gives a dusty response. Look, verse 14. And he takes an opportunity, look with me, verse 15, to turn to the crowd and deliver some pretty explicit truth, which, really, I imagine, I speak for myself, we still find hard to hear in 21st century America.

Look at what Jesus says. Take care. Be on your guard against all covetousness. For one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

money can be hazardous. Consider the words of Psalm 49. When a rich man dies, he will carry nothing away.

[16 : 32] His glory will not go down after him, for though he lives, while he lives he counts himself blessed, and though you get praise when you do well for yourself, the psalmist says, his soul will go to the generation of his fathers who will never again see light.

If you do sacrilegious things like I do and underline your Bibles, those verses in Psalm 49 not only ought to be underlined, I would encourage them to be memorized.

You see, the rich man here, most of us think Jesus is not thinking about us, he's speaking about them, those people who won the 1.28 billion.

Surely we're not amongst the rich, are we? At Holy Trinity this morning, you say? Amongst the rich, close to 46% of the world's population lives on less than \$5.50 a day.

I think that probably makes me rich. And you. And all of us here this morning.

[17 : 54] Jesus says to us, to us, take care, be on your guard against all covetousness for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

And look, I find this as tough as I imagine you do. Covetousness, according to the New Testament, is idolatry. Why? Because life, as John 17 says, is not in having things.

True life is found in having and knowing God. So let's look at this parable from verse 16. Have a look with me in Luke chapter 12 and cast your eyes over to verse 16.

He told them a parable saying, the land of a rich man produced plentifully, plentifully. And he thought to himself, what shall I do?

For I have nowhere to store my crops. This guy's agricultural business, whatever it was, it obviously proved to be extremely successful.

[18 : 59] And that's good. We need thriving businesses. It's good when your business prospers. It's good generally when you get promoted or your salary rises. It's good generally when your investments grow.

Look at verse 16. That little phrase, produced plentifully. Do you see that there? It's a fascinating word in the Greek. It comes from the word from which we get our word euphoria.

Euphoria. And that's how it can feel when the stocks are doing well, when the interest is accumulating, and the business is prospering, and the produce is increasing.

This man is not called a fool for being successful, or a productive farmer, or a businessman. No, in the euphoria of his success, he has forgotten God.

He's lost sight of all of those things, of God in his euphoria. She can be very addictive. And three mistakes the rich fall of Luke 12 has made, and three mistakes that are commonly made by disciples of Jesus today.

[20 : 15] They're not all original to me, but I do know they'll be as impacting to you as I found them when I studied the passage. Firstly, the man of Luke 12 looked to money as his source of stability.

Think about that. Look down in verse 19. Have a look with me in your Bible there. He decides to store his surplus for a comfortable future. Build bigger bombs.

That was the way he dealt with it. And I wonder how often we have thought if only I could save enough, get an extra investment or two, accumulate enough, then I would have no more worries.

As I was preparing this I was thinking about how absurd really the language of the financial world is today. we can buy things called futures.

We can buy things called securities. And yet when we stand before God stripped of every credit card and pension plan and life insurance and summer vacation, only possessing what we bring in our hearts, it's very solemn, isn't it?

[21 : 26] how absurd and tragic the lover of money seems on the day they stand before the Lord, even with all their securities. Reminds me of their great hymn of the faith.

Nothing in my hands I bring simply to your cross I cling.

You need to teach some hymns in this church. Get the people singing the hymns of the faith. I love the modern songs, don't get me wrong, but I'm a lover of the great hymns of the faith, as many of you know.

You see, the greatest lie of money is, I'll take care of you, you'll be okay. And this parable reminds us that we can forget God very easily, especially in the euphoria of plenty and the exhilaration of self sufficiency.

Brothers and sisters, it's all alarmingly fragile. Please see it like that. we may not get to the end of this day, let alone to the end of your career or your retirement.

[22 : 34] And if your heart is really looking to money for your security and not to God, then tragically, verse 20, quoting Jesus, you are a fool. That's the word he uses.

The man of Luke 12 looked to money as his source of security. He was a fool. A fool. And we never know what today is going to bring, do we?

I got an email from one of our rectors, a text message during the week, who told me that one of the senior wardens of our diocese, a man I've known all the years I've been a bishop, and before that, wasn't feeling so well, went to the doctor, maybe less than two weeks to live.

We don't know that we'll make it to the end of today. Brothers and sisters, be not foolish. Secondly, here's the second error this man made. He looked to money as his source of satisfaction.

This is where it gets a little awkward because if I can just accumulate a little bit more surplus, verse 18, then it will be okay. I'll relax, I'll eat, I'll drink, I'll be merry, just a little bit more.

[23 : 52] But the problem with just a little bit more is how much more is enough. Right? Verse 19, enough is never quite enough.

We see it here. Please look with me. Verse 19, I'm reminded of Ecclesiastes 5, which says, he who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income.

If Jesus' words in verse 15 need any confirmation, there are enough, I imagine, miserable rich people in Syracuse, or wherever you may live, to prove that the satisfied life does not come from money or things.

Some people might call the man in Luke 12 prudent. He's going to build bigger barns. wise and successful and judicious.

Jesus calls him a fool. A fool. You see, what's wrong with eating and drinking and being merry as you plan your life?

[24 : 57] Well, nothing if the dead are not raised. But if there is a God and there is a resurrection, and there are people to be invested in for eternity, then just living for the moment is a problem.

It's a serious problem and it was a foolish problem for this man. The illusion that this life on earth is all there is, is one of Mammon's most useful lies.

The man of Luke 12 looked to money as his source of security and he looked to money as his source of satisfaction. And thirdly, he looked to money.

It's very dangerous to do so as his source of significance. And in the original parable, there are 54 words. Eighteen of them are in the first person.

Words like I, me, and mine. And I don't believe we're meant to miss that. This man seems self obsessed.

[26 : 08] He has not given money, not given God a second look. And according to that very notable theologian with whom I had breakfast this morning, my wife Brenda, as we were studying this passage, she said, this man made himself to be God.

God. And I think she's right. You see, where is the recognition that he is only a steward of his resources for the glory of God, the land that produced such a harvest for him, to whom does it belong?

It belongs to the Lord. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. Some of you know Brenda and I are just a few days back from our 2022 tour of the Holy Land.

And I was reminded as we travelled throughout the Holy Land that no Israeli citizen can own the earth. They cannot own the property on which their houses are.

You try and get an Israeli to describe that process to you is very complicated and I didn't completely understand it. But it reminds us what that the earth is not theirs.

[27 : 29] The earth belongs to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel. And this man did not see that.

Where is his expression of gratitude to God? Where is the thought of neighbours he might assist, the grain he might give away? Imagine that. I don't believe we are meant to notice his silence about these matters.

He had become his own God. And Brenda, I believe, is right. You see, in the United States, many of us are achievement addicts of one sort or another.

Because we're rightly taught in this country to press on and to go deeper and to look for more. And as a naturalised citizen of this great republic, that's a great gift, I believe, of the United States, of America.

It defines us. It puts value on who we are. It gives us meaning. But if it becomes our significance, we are in real trouble.

[28 : 39] Look at that little phrase in your Bibles at the end of verse 21. It's a very haunting phrase. and we can turn it into a question and ask ourselves, am I rich towards God?

Are we living more for ourselves and less for God, or more for God and less for ourselves? Being rich towards God means counting God more valuable than anything else in our lives.

so, so easy for a preacher to say that, and so hard for the preacher to do that. That's really the question here. It means using whatever I have got in the way of earthly resources to show how much we love and value God, and a recognition, a true recognition, that the New Testament calls us to simplicity rather than accumulation, in the lives we lead.

And we see that in one or two people, don't we? The very humble, godly Christians. I saw it in my parents-in-law. Humble, godly Christians, all their lives, who lived simply and humbly for Christ. You see, my brothers and sisters, it is the Lord Jesus who provides us with security. He will never leave us or forsake us. It is the Lord who provides us with significance.

[30 : 14] Oh, today we need that message. You see, significance isn't in our wealth or in ourselves, or in the identity we want to create. It's only truly in Christ.

And it is the Lord Jesus who provides us with satisfaction. It is he who said, I am the bread of life, and whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall not ever thirst.

The issue for the man of Luke 12 was not that his fields had produced plentifully, thank God they had. It was that God had ceased to be his supreme treasure.

You see, true riches consist of a life that is lived for Christ and valuing him before all things, whether you receive the minimum wage or whether you're earning a million dollars a year.

Value him and maybe help each other to value him. About everything else. Someone yesterday, someone here, was talking to me about Richard Foster.

[31 : 19] Who was that? It was you, sir. You were talking to me about Richard Foster, the theologian and the author from Denver, Colorado. I was saying, I lived on his book as a young Christian and a young preacher.

In fact, I've still got that book and when I open it today, a quarter of it falls out because the binding broke because I read it so much. He says this, listen, and I am going to conclude because we've got to baptize Thomas. This is what he says.

He says, without question, money has taken on a sacred character in our world and it would do us good to find ways to dethrone it, defame it, deflate it, trample it under our feet.

And he continues to step on it and yell at it and laugh at it and list it down your scale of values and engage in the most profane act of all and give it away.

give it away because then you will know where your treasure is. Let us pray.

[32 : 33] Oh merciful creator, your loving hands have always been opened wide to satisfy the need of every living creature. make us always thankful for your loving providence and give us grace to honour you with all that you have given to us and entrusted to us that we, remembering the account we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, ever one God, world without end.

Amen.