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Luke 12:13-21

Third Message

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## CAN WEALTH SECURE YOUR FUTURE?

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

I once heard a story about a woman who asked the pastor of a Lutheran church to conduct a funeral service for her dog. He told her he was sorry he could not accommodate her, and suggested she contact the Pentecostal minister across the street. She asked how much she should offer to pay the man for his services. "How much did you have in mind?" asked the minister. "About \$1,000," she replied. "Oh, my goodness!" said the minister. "I didn't realize the dog was a Lutheran!"

At some point in our lives, all of us begin to set financial priorities and establish emotional attachments to our possessions. Last week, my son broke a sugar bowl which my wife and I bought in Europe some years ago. When I asked him how it happened, he didn't seem overly concerned about it. It was just an accident, he said. I asked him how he would feel if I came to him and told him I had broken his snowboard. "Oh," he replied, "that would be different." Possessions are not bad in themselves, but if we grow too fond of them, our priorities can become skewed.

One of the most important questions we will ever have to answer is, what is it that will really grant us life? Our Lord's parable of the rich fool, from chapter 12 of the gospel of Luke, gives the unambiguous answer to this question.

Luke 12:13-21:

**And someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over you?" And He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' And he said, 'This is what I will do: 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 many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:13-21 NASB)**

An unnamed man stepped out of the crowd listening to Jesus and said he was being defrauded out of his inheritance. In Jesus' day, rabbis were regarded as judges, so the man's request was not out of line. Rabbis were expected to be knowledgeable regarding the law, and competent to give a legal ruling. This is by no means an uncommon complaint. The man's father had died and left his inheritance, in all likelihood lands and property, as a unit to his sons. Psalm 133:1 reflects on how pleasant it is when brothers manage to cooperate harmoniously in such situations: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity," says the psalm.

Dividing family possessions is a common source of tension. It can be an emotional time for siblings. I learned this firsthand when my mother died last year. Following the funeral, my brothers and I had only one afternoon to sort through all the family belongings. Even though we did so with a good spirit, it was a difficult time for us.

Notice our Lord's response. First, he refused to be taken in by the man's seemingly legitimate question. Jesus' scope of ministry did not include passing judgment on legal matters. He refused to offer specific advice, and abruptly dismissed the matter. Leon Morris observed, "He came to bring men to God, not property to man."

Jesus knew that greed and covetousness lay behind the man's request. The petitioner was not asking for arbitration, rather he was ordering Jesus, the judge, to carry out his wishes. He had already decided what he wanted and was merely trying to use Jesus to get it. He actually was seeking help to pressure his brother to finalize a division between them. The rabbis taught that if one heir wanted a division of the inheritance, it should be granted. Thus the demanding petitioner was saying, in effect, "Give me my rights."

We have a penchant to disguise our sin, clothing it with what we purport to be the will of God. We try to adorn our sin with virtue. Here, the man was packaging his greed in the guise of justice. Satan hides the evil in the good. But Jesus saw through the man's ruse. A friend of my wife came over to visit one evening and began complaining about her husband. It was obvious that she was seeking to garner our support, and the name of God, for her cause. She may have had a legitimate complaint, but she was seeking to use us. This was what the man in the parable was trying to do with Jesus.

But Jesus quickly voiced his disapproval. "Look to yourself first," was his response (see Luke 13:1-3). The salutation, "O man" (verse 14), usually was uttered to introduce a complaint against the one being addressed. Obviously the man and his brother had a broken relationship, and the petitioner wanted that finalized by a complete separation. But Jesus insisted that he had not come as an arbiter or divider. The obvious alternative, of course, is reconciler. The word "divider" (*meristes* in Greek) is a rare word. If the "r" is dropped and the "i" moved, it becomes *mesites*, which means reconciler. Jesus was not demonstrating indifference to the claims of legal justice; rather he was insisting that there was a greater gain than getting an inheritance, and a greater loss than losing one.

Jesus went on to respond with a parable (verses 16-20), which is bracketed with a couple of general principles (verses 15, 21). The petitioner, said Jesus, would not have his problem solved even if his brother granted him his portion of the inheritance (verse 15); and he ended the matter by giving a contrast between laying up treasures for oneself and being rich towards God (verse 21).

The parable introduces a first-century Yuppie. We are not told how he gained his riches, but his method of acquiring them is not criticized. Apparently they were the gift of God. Not only did he

have more than enough, but he was given the gift of a bumper crop. His problem lay in what to do with the unearned surpluses. He debated with himself and took time to come up with a solution. In the Middle East, such debates normally would have taken place in the city gate, where decisions were made in community. Even the smallest transaction would be worthy of discussion. But this man had no one to talk to. He was a prisoner of his own wealth because greed had isolated him from the community. His solution was to tear down his old barns and build bigger ones. There was where he would lay up his treasure. It is helpful to remember that tithes and offerings were to be set aside in barns, where the priests and the Levites would come to collect them. The rich man was hoarding and stockpiling his wealth.

He thought his wealth had secured his future, but he was mistaken. He made his plan, but God had another plan. One night, unexpectedly, God came for the soul of this man whom he described as a fool.

What can we learn from this parable about the spirituality of wealth? First, I would say, we learn that real life does not stem from possessions. This was the principle Jesus gave in verse 15 in the words, “for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”

We can observe this principle in the lives of both the rich man of the parable and the man who came to Jesus. In the story, Jesus became a judge over the brothers, not between them. He judged the motives of their hearts, not the amount they had stashed away in their bank accounts.

There is something that is even more important than justice. The word for “life” refers to a special quality of life that is not merely physical. According to Jesus, this kind of life does not come from possessions. The rich man foolishly thought he had life by the tail. He imagined he would be able to eat, drink and be merry for years to come.

But this is a great deception. We are so easily fooled into thinking that if we acquire things, we will have a better, more enjoyable, more comfortable life. So we seek an enriched quality of life by acquiring possessions in the fond hope that if we can only acquire enough material things, they will produce the abundant life for us. Thus we begin making lists, and planning on how we might acquire things.

But this acquisitiveness can become a sickness. It is called greed. Greed, the desire to possess things, is subtle, but it is a sin which drew harsher words from Jesus than either adultery or drunkenness. Greed affects both rich and poor alike. Being poor doesn't prevent one from being greedy. It doesn't matter whether we are in the right or not, whether we deserve it or not or whether we can afford it or not, we are infected with an insatiable desire to acquire possessions. But we find that the more we acquire, the more we want. We are not satisfied, so we build bigger barns. Someone once asked John D. Rockefeller how much money was enough. “One dollar more,” was his response.

A sobering illustration of the deceitfulness of greed is found in the story of Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kings 21. Ahab saw the vineyard of Naboth and coveted it. He offered him money or land, but Naboth would not think of parting with the family inheritance. As a consequence, Ahab moped around the palace like a child. He was vexed and sullen and he would not eat food. He had it all, everything he wanted, but he was not content. Overcome with covetousness and greed, all he could think about was what he didn't have. When

Jezebel found out why Ahab was so upset, she trumped up charges against Naboth, with the result that he was stoned to death. Ahab's greed resulted in the death of Naboth.

After I graduated from college I moved to California and got my first job, and for the first time in my life I began making real money. Possessions were hard to come by when I was growing up. My goal had always been to acquire only what would fit in my car if I ever decided to head out. But now at last, real possessions were within my grasp. I made a list of things I wanted to buy—a football, a basketball, skis, a sleeping bag (you can tell what was important to me back then). I got a great deal of satisfaction from acquiring something that I wanted and checking it off my list. Over the years that list has grown; the items have changed and have gotten more expensive. But now I can readily see that there is no end to the list and there is no way I will ever acquire all the things I once felt I had to have.

Acquiring possessions is a major focus here in Silicon Valley. There are more playthings, more games, more trinkets available than anyone could possibly use. Then there are the options to consider. Do you get option A or B? If you get option B, you can add other options later. We are consumed consumers!

But Jesus says we have to be on our guard. Greed, not life, is what will result from the things we spend a lifetime acquiring. If we see something we want, we have to ask ourselves why we want it. If we think it will give us life, we must correct our thinking quickly before the possession becomes just another idol in our home. When we don't expect to receive life from our acquisitions, our greed is checked.

Second, we really don't “own” the possessions we acquire; God owns them. The rich man failed to grasp this, though. Notice his five-fold use of the possessive pronoun “my”: *my* crops, *my* barns, *my* grain, *my* goods. He even referred to *my* soul. He imagined that what he possessed was his to keep, that he had final authority and control over everything. But he was mistaken. His possessions, even his soul, were only on loan to him. The word “required” in verse 20 was commonly used to refer to the repayment of a loan. The rich man's soul was on loan, and the owner wanted the loan returned. His possessions would be transferred or loaned to someone else, and the rich man didn't even know who that would be.

We are greatly deceived if we think we *own* our possessions. Proof that we do not own them, of course, is that we cannot take them with us. We bring nothing into this life and we take nothing out of it. When we go through the door called “death,” we pass through, in a manner of speaking, something like airport security gates where we have to take all the coins out of our pockets and put our carry-on luggage on the conveyor belt. But there is a difference: unlike airport security gates, after we pass through the door of death, everything we owned is gone forever. I had a graphic reminder of this just yesterday when I visited a woman whose husband died recently. She showed me the box that contained his ashes, and there was not one of his possessions in it. Billy Graham once said, “You will never see a U-Haul trailer driving behind a hearse.”

This principle applies to everything we have—our homes and all our possessions, our health, our spouses, our children. We must learn that if we think our possessions are ours to keep, then, in effect, they will “own” us. The parable teaches us to hold things loosely, to not attach too much value or importance to money and possessions because they are not ours to begin with.

Third, we are fools if we think that wealth can secure our future. The rich fool reminds me of the story of the stockbroker who encountered a genie on the way to the office. Granted one wish, the stockbroker asked for a copy of his local newspaper one year hence. He hurriedly turned to the stock market page to plan his killing in stocks, but he got more than he bargained for. On the opposite page he spied his picture in an obituary describing his death in an automobile accident.

The text has an interesting word play. The rich man was planning his future. The word translated “to be merry, to enjoy oneself” comes from the Greek verb, *euphraino*. The noun form is *euphron*, which speaks of a state of self-enjoyment. The word “very productive” in verse 16 is from the same root word in Greek, *euphoreo*, meaning, to bring forth plenty. The formula is, if you bring forth many things and store them up, then you will secure the future and you will enjoy all aspects of the good life. But God’s plan for the future is very different from the rich man’s. God called him a fool. The word for fool is *aphron*. Only the prefix has changed. God was saying to the man that instead of the good life (*euphron*), many things will yield foolishness (*aphron*), namely, without mind, spirit, and emotions. The rich man was a fool because he thought he could secure his future with money.

In the 1950’s, the European wrestling champion, Yussif the Turk, came to America to fight “Strangler” Lewis for the “world championship” and \$5000. Yussif won, and he insisted he be paid the \$5000 in gold, which he stuffed into his championship belt. The money mattered so much to him that he refused to remove the belt until he had reached home safely. Boarding the first available ship for Europe, he headed home. But halfway across the Atlantic, the ship floundered in a storm and began to sink. In a panic, Yussif jumped for a lifeboat and missed. He went straight to the bottom of the ocean. His golden belt had become a golden anchor.

We live in a society where most people are occupied with doing what the rich man sought to do. We busily set up retirement schemes, planning our future financial security in an effort to try and control our destiny. The investment commercials on television even strive to make us feel guilty if we haven’t already achieved financial security. Not having to worry about finances sounds like a wonderful thing, doesn’t it? But it is a fallacy.

Does this mean that we are never to plan for the future? Certainly not. We should be good stewards of the gifts that God has given us. But we must not drift along with every wind of change, viewing things non-critically, thinking we can plan for and control our destiny, fixing our hope on the uncertainty of riches. James has an appropriate word for us here: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that’” (James 4:13-15).

Only the fool imagines that money will secure his future.

Fourth, since life comes only from God, the exhortation is to become rich toward him. The encounter ends with another principle, in verse 21: “So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God.” The man was a fool. He had built his life around things that couldn’t last and possessions that really didn’t matter. Then he died, surrounded by his wealth, poor, lonely and

friendless, not knowing who would gather his goods. If you plan alone and build alone, you will die alone.

There are some things money cannot buy. Money will buy a bed, but not rest. Money will buy books, but not wisdom. Money will buy a house, but not a home. Money will buy pleasure, but not joy. Money will buy a crucifix, but not a Savior.

An enormously rich man complained to a psychiatrist that despite his great wealth, which enabled him to have whatever he desired, he still felt miserable. The psychiatrist took the man to the window overlooking the street and asked, “What do you see?” The man replied, “I see men, women, and children.” The psychiatrist then took the man to stand in front of a mirror and asked, “Now what do you see?” The man said, “I see only myself.” The psychiatrist then said, “In the window there is glass and in the mirror there is glass, and when you look through the glass in the window, you see others, but when you look into the glass of the mirror you see only yourself.” “The reason for this,” said the psychiatrist, “is that behind the glass in the mirror is a layer of silver. When silver is added, you cease to see others. You only see yourself.”

Our Lord’s parable strikes at covetousness in all its forms, in every area of life. Will our wealth be a means of personal power or extravagant love? Do we store up God’s gifts for ourselves or do we take the surplus gifts and offer them to God for his use? Let us share our riches with others. When we realize wealth, we become liable to greed. We covet and then we hoard. Concerned about our own leisure and luxury, we refuse to share. We begin thinking of wealth as power to be applied, not love to be shared. If a man gets everything he wants, however, it will only succeed in drawing him farther away from God.

Rather than being controlled by greed, let us strive to become rich toward God. We are not called to be rich fools or complaining brothers. We are called to have treasure in heaven that will never be exhausted. Paul told Timothy to “instruct those who are rich not to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.” According to Paul, becoming rich toward God means being rich in good works, generous and ready to share.

If we really want to secure the future then, we need to become rich toward God, to store up treasures in heaven. We may never own a mansion or a Mercedes, or enjoy a cruise around the world, but each one of us has opportunity to become rich toward God. Abundant life comes from him. We may not all have the same financial opportunities, but we all have the same spiritual opportunities. We are always wealthy spiritually, even if we are not wealthy materially. We can lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven “where moth and rust do not consume.” If you want proof of this, take a trip to Mexico or some other Third World country and live with Christians there who are materially poor. You will soon discover that they are the ones who are rich and we are the ones who are poor.

We cannot live in both worlds. The sooner we determine where we are going to make our investment, where we are going to put our hearts and hope and love, the better off we will be. One world we can secure, the other we can’t. Only the fool thinks he can.

David Roper has written, “The bottom line of all investment is return. What do we get for our effort? If we invest solely in things on

the earth, we'll lose them all. But if we invest ourselves in knowing God and in loving Him, it's an investment that's truly secure."

One day in Samaria, the in-between place, the place between home and destination, a man stepped out of the crowd and made a demand of Jesus. But he got much more than he bargained for. If it was life he really wanted, then he had to change his heart. The parable ends with a question: "Who will own what you have prepared?" We are not given the answer. Speculation is futile. The parable is just enough "off" to require our involvement. It is neither an explanation nor an illustration. It requires participation. It preserves the integrity of everyday life. It is not an alien invasion; it is a courtship. It trusts our imagination; it is not condescending. The rich man's silence leaves each one of us in that lonely place where we must answer out of our own soul.

May God give us the grace and the strength to lay up treasure in heaven, to see beyond this world, and be rich towards him.

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