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The Gospel of Luke
XLII. Rich Towards God
Luke 12:13-21

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Jesus had just finished teaching the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and how even the hairs on their heads were numbered by a loving God – when, from out of the crowd burst a voice shouting: *“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”* At first, Jesus seems annoyed by the request: *“Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?”* But we then witness Jesus immediately discerning the real reason behind this request. And He speaks to the man, to the crowd, and to His disciples regarding that real reason: *“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”* The real reason behind this man’s request is not a plea for justice or fairness, but simply greed.

You see, in that culture, when a man died, everything he owned passed to his eldest son. And it was the duty of the eldest son to provide for any younger sons – his brothers – out of what he had inherited. If we know anything at all about life in families, then we can guess how well this worked in practice. Hence the request of what is clearly the younger brother in this case, asking Jesus to force his elder brother to give him his share of the inheritance from their father. On the surface, it is a reasonable request for justice, for fairness.

But, as we said, Jesus doesn’t just hear this man’s words, He reads this man’s heart – and sees that justice and fairness are not really what this request is all about. What this man’s request is really all about – is the deadly sin of greed. Notice, for example, what this man did not say. He did not say, *“Teacher, my brother and I are fighting – please help us to be reconciled to one another.”* No, the request was purely about the money: *“Jesus, make my brother give me the cash.”*

And so, Jesus refuses to play the arbitrator in this domestic drama. Instead, he goes after the main issue, the real problem: *“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness.”* And the reason why we should be on our guard against all signs of greed in our hearts? *“For one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*

This is, without question, one of the hardest teachings Jesus gives to us – right up there with love you enemy and forgive seventy times seven. Be on our guard against greed. For our lives do not consist in what we own. It’s a teaching which runs counter to how we really think about money and our possessions. For we find in money our sense of security, and in the acquisition of things a sense of purpose and happiness. And here Jesus shoots the whole business down. Avoid greed, He says. Your life does not consist in being rich in things. A hard teaching.

And it always has been. Nearly a hundred years ago, the great preacher George Arthur Buttrick addressed these words to his flock:

This is revolutionary teaching. We do not believe it, except in certain moments of piercing insight. If we did believe it, it is doubtful if we would have courage to obey; for it would make havoc of an age that is cluttered with things. Our standards of success are almost fatally entangled with the lust for acquisition, but we are not yet ready to abandon them . . . Yet our “much goods” have not brought peace.¹

“Yet our ‘much goods’ have not brought peace.” And that is true, isn’t it – as much as we hate to admit it. So, perhaps we should, for a moment at least, consider the unsettling possibility that Jesus knows what He is talking about – that He is right about us and right about our relationship with money and things. And right that this constant desire for more – which propels our economy and compels our hearts – may well be something which poses great danger to our souls. As Jesus said just a few weeks ago, in chapter nine: “For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”²

“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” And, to illustrate, Jesus then tells a parable. A man already rich was experiencing a year of bumper crops, making him even richer. He takes counsel with himself and decides that he will tear down his existing barns and build new and bigger barns to hold all his wealth of grain and goods. And then – and here’s the key part – and then, he thinks to himself, “I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry!” But that very night God said to this rich man, “Fool!” – and when God calls you a fool, fool indeed you are – “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” And then Jesus concludes the parable with the moral of the story: “So is the one – a fool – who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God.”

And is not rich towards God. The rich fool makes two deep mistakes – and from him we can learn not only what to avoid (“Be on your guard against covetousness”), but also what is right and what is good and what really is the only sure source of our security and happiness – what it means to be “rich towards God.” Great mistake number one of the rich fool is that he has got his life frame of reference completely backwards – He has mistaken what is temporary for that which is eternal, and failed to prioritize that which is eternal over that which is temporary. To put it simply, he is living for this world only. He is living for what he understands to be success and security for this life only – without a care for the fact that he is intended for eternity by God. He is living only for today and tomorrow – without a thought for forever. Treating temporary things as if were permanent, and permanent things as if – well, as if they don’t really matter.

Which reminds me of a story John Ortberg tells of a pastor friend of his attending a conference. The speaker at this conference surrounded himself on stage with all sorts of props representing all the stuff that the world wants us to value – a dollhouse representing our homes, a Matchbox car, a desk representing our work, and so on. All the stuff of worldly success. And then, while the audience watched, he took a roll of bright red stickers, each one emblazoned with

the word “Temporary” on them, and he began to place a “Temporary” sticker on each and every item. As he did so, he explained:

Everything that I’m putting a sticker on is temporary. It will not last. It will fade away. We invest our emotions in them because when we acquire it, it gives us a little thrill. And we think the thrill will last. But it does not. It fades. And eventually, so will what we acquire.

If you are living for what you see up here, then you are living for what is temporary. Temporary satisfaction, temporary fulfillment, temporary meaning. It will come to an end – but you never will. It will leave you with a terrible emptiness.³

The speaker then had one last sticker left in his hand, a big blue sticker which had the word “Eternal” printed on it. He said, *“There is only one thing in this room that is not temporary . . . There is only one item that you will be allowed to take with you from this life into the next.”* And then he had a little girl join him on stage, and he put the blue “Eternal” sticker on the collar of her dress. And he asked the audience: *“When you get to the end of your life and take in your last breath, what do you want your life to have been about? What will make it rich in the eyes of God?”⁴*

The pastor who observed this was so moved that he went home and issued a challenge to his congregation:

. . . take a pad of self-adhesive notes and write “TEMPORARY” on each one. Walk around and distribute them everywhere you need to be reminded. Put one on your car. Put one on the front door of your house. Put TEMPORARY stickers on each piece of furniture. Put one on the front of your checkbook. Stick them on all the clothes in your closet. Put them on your [iPad] and on the TV and the treadmill and barbecue.

Then take another set of self-adhesive notes and write “ETERNAL.” Put them on your family. Put them on your friends. Put one on your boss. Put one on the stranger behind the counter. Put one on the person you most dislike in the world. Don’t forget to put one on your own forehead as well.

For the stuff in our lives is only temporary. The day is coming when all our 401(k)s and our bank statements will be irrelevant. The titles on our resumes will no longer impress anyone. GPAs and SAT scores and college acceptances will be long-forgotten. No one will know what clothes hung in our closets or what cars sat in our garages.

All that will be left is love. That which was done out of love for God will last. Every human being you see is a cleverly disguised receptacle of eternity. You can take the love with you.

The object of life is to be rich toward God.⁵

Which leads directly to the second great mistake of the rich fool. In his greed for more, his life had collapsed inward upon himself. Just note how many times he says “I” – what shall I do, I will do this, I will store my grain, I will say to my soul. Not once, not even once, does he say “you” or even “we.” God had given him such bounty – and he could have found a much better place for his surplus of grain than in even bigger barns. That surplus grain could have been stored in the mouths and bellies of the hungry, the homeless, and the poor. But for the rich fool, there was only me, myself, and I.

The Bible says this to us again and again and again. Jesus says it to us again right here – that our lives do not consist of, are not measured by, nor are they intended for the selfish acquisition of a lot of stuff. We were created for, our lives are meant to consist in and are measured by – love. How we love God, first of all; and then how we love our neighbor. Paul said it, too. He said that there are only three things we take with us when we die – faith, hope, and love. And that the greatest of these is love. That’s what makes a person rich – not things, not money – but relationships marked by love. And that’s what makes a person rich towards God – living in His love, for His love, trusting in His love for our real security and finding in His love our true peace.

John Ortberg wrote this in his book with the wonderful title, When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box:

Being rich toward God means growing a soul that is increasingly healthy and good.

Being rich toward God means loving and enjoying the people around you.

Being rich toward God means learning about your gifts and passions and doing good work to help improve the world.

Being rich toward God means becoming generous with your stuff.

*Being rich toward God means making that which is **temporary** become the servant of that which is **eternal**.⁶*

We are to be rich towards God.

One last story – Jesus told us the parable of the rich fool – so let’s call this the parable the rich man who was not a fool. Gordon Atkinson, a pastor in San Antonio, tells of getting word that Red Davis had died. Twenty-five years before, Red Davis had been the very successful C.E.O. of a big company in East Texas that had employed thousands of people. But that is not the reason why his funeral was the largest ever in the history of the First Baptist Church of Marshall, Texas. On the day Red was given his gold watch, he sat down with his pastor – who just happened to be Atkinson’s father – and told him that he would like to find a way to better serve God. The pastor assumed that Red would want to chair the finance or the strategic planning committee – something big and important like that. But instead Red said that he had heard that there was an opening in the three- and four-year-old Sunday School class for a teacher – and that he thought he would like the job.

And so it came to pass that the former C.E.O. of one of the largest companies in East Texas was to be found the next Sunday sitting on the floor telling Bible stories to children. Red didn't know much about teaching children, but he was warm and kind, and he understood that patience and hugs are the keys to a child's heart. Not only so, but he began to call each of the children in his class each Saturday night, just to ask how their week had gone. He would end the conversation by telling them how much he was looking forward to seeing them in Sunday School in the morning. And you can bet, every child would be there. Parents who had a child in Red's class figured out pretty quickly that they were going to have to go to church every single Sunday, because none of Red's kids ever wanted to miss Sunday School.

Atkinson continues:

It wasn't long before groups of little children were seen following Red around the church wherever he went. He never minded the attention or the trouble. Some of them were in his class. Others were in classes from years back. People started referring to them as "Red's army."

Five years became ten, and ten became twenty-five. Red slowed down a bit, but he was there every Sunday for a quarter of a century. Almost everyone in the church had a child or a grandchild who had been in Red's class.

I hear that if Red ever stood up to speak in a church business meeting, a respectful and reverent hush would fall over the congregation. People respected Red not because he was a successful businessman, but because he was Red Davis the gentle Sunday school teacher and passionate lover of children.

. . . Red Davis died quietly in the Marshall hospital. I don't suppose the ripples of grief will travel much farther than Longview and Marshall. But that wouldn't matter to Red. He was a man who was pleased to wait upon the table of his own humble calling until the day when the Lord called him to take his place at the Big Banquet in the sky.

My father did the funeral. At some point in the service he asked everyone who was ever in Red's Sunday school class or ever had a child or relative in his class to stand. Very few people remained in their seats.

Dad told the story about the woman who was in the local grocery store with her small child. The little boy said, "Mama, I just saw God." The woman looked up and the child was pointing at Red Davis. He was a boy in Red's class. When he tried to wrap his little mind around the very big idea of God, the best he could do was think of Red.⁷

Red – who was rich towards God and rich in love towards the children of God.

“Be on guard against all covetousness,” says Jesus, *“for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”* The real goal of our lives is not to be rich, but to be rich towards God.

¹ George A. Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), pp.133-134.

² Luke 9:25.

³ John Ortberg, When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), pp. 30-31.

⁴ Ortberg, p. 31.

⁵ Ortberg, pp. 31-32.

⁶ Ortberg, p. 27.

⁷ Gordon Atkinson, “Following Red,” Christian Century, Vol. 121, No. 25 (December 14, 2004), p. 9.