

## Dealing With Wealth

### Luke 12:13-21

At the beginning of chapter 12 Jesus was teaching his disciples and also a large crowd, on the need for faithfulness in situations of persecution, but, at the beginning of our reading today, he is interrupted by an apparently irrelevant request from a man in the crowd. Let's look at verse 13:

"Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." (Luke 12:13 NIV)

Actually this was more like a directive to Jesus than a polite request. He knows what verdict he expects and all he wants is for Jesus to use his authority for material rather than spiritual purposes. Probably the man was a younger son, who because of his lesser position in the household needs help to achieve a reasonable settlement. The text doesn't say that his brother was present, but he may well have been, it fits well with Jesus being asked to speak to him. As a Rabbi, Jesus would have been qualified to judge this dispute according to Jewish Law, as is provided for in Numbers 27:1-11. However, the man isn't really asking for the matter to be adjudicated, he's asking Jesus to pronounce judgement in his favour. In any event, this seems to bear no relation whatsoever to the subject on which Jesus had been teaching, authentic witness to Christ. Certainly Jesus immediately refuses to get involved in the matter of the man's inheritance – see verse 14:

"Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" (Luke 12:14 NIV)

Jesus came to bring people to God not to bring property to people. In any event, Jesus then weaves the interruption into the fabric of his teaching, which I believe is for both the disciples and the crowd; no doubt because of the relevance of the topic. Although just after our reading this morning, in verse 22, Jesus reverts to teaching focussed on the disciples rather than the large crowd. Christ is warning us very strongly against greed and focussing on material wealth rather than God. Look at verse 15:

“Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” (Luke 12:15 NIV)

Here ‘life’ may well be a metaphor for salvation. Those who would enjoy salvation must beware of one of its major enemies – ‘possessions’. Greed was widely recognised as a form of depravity both in Jewish Literature and the wider Greco-Roman world. We need to be rich before God rather than rich in the material world.

Jesus then tells a parable to further illustrate this theme in verses 16-20 of our reading:

“16 And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. 17 He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ 18 "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. 19 And I’ll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” 20 "But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’” (Luke 12:16-20 NIV)

So the rich landowner does not behave well with regard to possessions. Apparently he was already rich at the beginning of this story, but he’s greedy for more. Those who love wealth can never have enough. He’s clearly planning to hoard away much of his harvest so as to avoid flooding the market and cutting down the price of his new crops from his bumper harvest. He’s clearly self-indulgent, he is looking forward to years of pleasure. he continually uses the word ‘my’ which points to ingrained selfishness. The man is not concerned to use his wealth wisely. He is trying neither to serve God nor to help other people. He is not even concerned to have a richer and fuller life for himself. He is concerned only with self-indulgence.

The Lord labels the rich landowner a fool, because his way of life denies the relevance of God. He fails to account for God in making

his plans. As Luke tells us in chapter 16 of his gospel, one cannot serve both God and money:

“No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Luke 16:13 NIV)

The rich landowner hasn't realised that his life is 'on loan' from God and doesn't account for God's will and plans in devising his stratagems. He thinks the future is in his control – until he hears from God that his very life is forfeit. He thus fails to see the responsibilities involved in the possession of wealth. In Jewish thought the word 'fool' signifies a person who rebels against God or whose practices deny God. This fits well with the representation of greed as a form of idolatry. It only needs God to take away a man's life and it's immediately apparent that a man's material possessions are of no ultimate value to him. The man who is not rich towards God is indeed poor no matter the size of his bank balance. Jesus then turns to his disciples and emphasises the sort of practices that would naturally flow from a rebirth of their understanding of God's character and purposes.

If they could accept Christ's portrait of the caring God who provides for them, as the Father whose pleasure is manifest in his provision of the kingdom, would this not be motivation enough for a radically reconstructed attitude toward and set of behaviors concerning "the abundance of possessions"? Could they not find their security in God rather than in material possessions? And, given the proximity of the kingdom, would not this fresh perspective on God's character and activity serve as an invitation for new practices now?

These new practices could include more emphasis on giving and turning things over to God unlike the Pharisees who Jesus castigated at the beginning of chapter 12. Alertness and kingdom seeking need to prevail over worry and fear for those who would have 'life', those who wish to enjoy God's salvation. If the rich landowner had been aware of the needs of the poor within his community and given them food and other practical help he would have stored up treasures in

God's kingdom where they cannot be taken away from him. As Jesus teaches later in this chapter 12:

“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.” (Luke 12:33 NIV)

One can avoid becoming a slave to possessions by recognizing their temporary quality. The rich fool did not realize that he “owned” nothing. All he had—even his life—was on loan and could be called in at any time. Luke was telling Theophilus (to whom his gospel was addressed): “Friend, order your life in accordance with the one thing that is eternal—God. Let not greed for that which is temporary keep you from eternal treasure!”

Let me be clear here, I don't believe that God condemns wealth as such. What God does condemn is greed and over reliance on material things and our failure to use these things responsibly and also our refusal to share them with those in need.

Our reading today is a very strong warning against greed and over emphasis on material things, it's especially relevant to us here in the affluent West. Let us all make sure that we use whatever God has given to us wisely. Let us not be in idolatry by putting possessions in the place of God by being greedy and worshipping material goods. Let us all hold our material possessions lightly, recognising that we do not really own them, because everything we have comes from God. Let us give generously to the poor and needy and lay up treasures in heaven where they will not be lost or harmed and we may have good things to enjoy as we spend our eternal heavenly existence with our Lord.