
FEEDING THE SOUL WITH MATERIAL THINGS

The Parable of the Rich Fool

(Luke 12:13-21)

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Introduction

The Gospel of Luke is hailed as “the most beautiful book in existence”¹ because, for one, its literary style is excellent. From his prologue, one can discern that Luke wrote his own version of the gospel very carefully, in an orderly fashion, and tried to be as accurate as possible. He chose his materials or sources very well and used them creatively to serve his intent. This is evident especially in the parables.² Among the gospels, Luke has the most number of parables, and two of them—the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son (which may be found only in Luke)—are among the world’s best-loved stories.³

Luke made good use of parables to convey theology.⁴ One of the theologies Luke emphasizes involves the Christian attitude towards earthly possessions. Stein says, “No other books in the NT are as concerned about the Christian’s relationship to material possessions.”⁵

¹By Renan, quoted in Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students*, Vol.1, *The Four Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 251.

²Frank Stagg, “Luke’s Theological Use of Parables,” *Review and Expositor* 94 (Spr 1997), 215.

³Charles L. Childers, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1971), 422.

⁴See Stagg, 215-229.

⁵Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 45-56.

Passages such as Lk 3:11; 6:20-21a, 34-35, 38; 8:14; 11:41; 12:13-33; 14:12-14; 16:1-15,19-31; and 19:8 all have something to do with Christians and material things. Not only in his gospel does Luke deal with this subject but also in Acts (see Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-5:11). Here, Luke portrays the positive results of generosity and seeking first the Kingdom of God: blessings for the individual and growth for the church (compare Joseph in Acts 4:36-37 and Ananias and Sapphira in 5:1-11; see also Acts 2:47; 6:7). The Parable of the Rich Fool, which is also unique to Luke, is one of the sources he used to highlight Jesus' teaching about being a disciple and material possessions. This paper will interpret this parable and draw out eternal truths on how to handle wealth or earthly possessions as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This parable is very straightforward and simple. Jesus told the story to illustrate the point He made in verse 15: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Jesus, on the surface, dealt with the problem of covetousness, but He had a much deeper message: one cannot find life or hope or security in wealth but rather in God. What, then, are people to do with their money and resources? Jesus' implicit answer through this parable (and other related passages and parables in Luke [see references above]) is to share them with others; give to the needy. This way people will be providing for themselves not only in this life but also in eternity.

Context

The parable is part of the so-called travel document comprising Lk 9:51-18:14. It is set as one of Jesus' discourses while traveling to Jerusalem. Now, this is not one of Jesus' trips to Jerusalem. This is the journey that will eventually lead Him to the cross. The events narrated here, scholars say, cover the last six months of Jesus' life before being crucified. Luke tells us that Jesus "steadfastly set his face" (9:51, KJV) towards Jerusalem. Jesus was resolved to fulfill His mission. Stacy describes the mood surrounding the events as "'crunch time,' with high anxiety all around."⁶

Much of the content of this document is unique to Luke and/or Matthew, also known as non-Markan material. Martin regards this section of Luke's Gospel as the most important unit because it is here that the

⁶R. Wayne Stacy, "Luke 12:13-21: The Parable of the Rich Fool," *Review and Expositor* 94 (Spr 1997), 285.

Gospel's distinctive features come out. This section is primarily didactic, "even the parables in this section have a didactic-paranetic flavor."⁷

Jesus addressed the parable primarily to His disciples (Lk 12:1) but also to the swelling crowd that was following Him. In the context of chapter 12, He was teaching them how a disciple should live in the Kingdom of God. Stacy divides the discourse into three areas: persecution (vv.1-12), possessions (vv. 13-34), and the parousia (vv.35-48).⁸ Jesus just came from a meal in a Pharisee's house and was proceeding on His journey, giving various warnings and encouragements to His disciples, when one from the crowd asked Him to settle an inheritance dispute between him and his brother. Jesus found the request a very good springboard to teach about the right attitude of Kingdom citizens towards wealth or material possessions. He told them the story of the rich fool.

Historical and Cultural Details

In the ancient Mediterranean region, sibling rivalry was typical, and inheritance would not be an uncommon source of contention.⁹ The Jewish law on inheritance is laid out in the Torah in Deut 21:15-17 and Num 27:1-11; 36:7-9. According to the Torah, the firstborn son of the family is entitled to a double portion of the inheritance. The rest of the sons are to divide the remainder among themselves. If the father has no sons, the inheritance shall go to the daughters, as in the case of the daughters of Zelophehad. The inheritance shall remain within the tribe of the family and must not be transferred from tribe to tribe. Thus, the daughters of Zelophehad, in order to retain their inheritance, had to marry within the tribe of Manasseh, the tribe to which their father belonged. Ancient Jewish custom also allowed inheritance to be distributed among the heirs even if the father were still living if a son demanded it.¹⁰ This was the case with the prodigal son.

Apart from his request, Luke did not give any more details about the man. Was he duped out of his inheritance? Was his proper share not given to him? Or did he want more than what he received?

⁷Martin, 251.

⁸Stacy, 285.

⁹Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 359.

¹⁰Malina and Rohrbaugh, 359.

The man was not really out of order in bringing the problem to Jesus because it was common in that day for people to ask religious teachers or rabbis to settle their disputes.¹¹ The reason behind this is that the law of the land was embodied in the Torah, and since Israel was a theocracy, who was in a better position to settle disputes than the authorities on the Scriptures—the rabbis?¹² And Jesus, having been recognized by this time in His ministry as a rabbi or one who spoke on the Scriptures with great authority (Lk 4:32, 36; Mt 7:29), was approached by the man with his family problem.

With this in mind, it is interesting to note that Jesus refused to help the man. Why did He object to being the arbitrator? Luke did not tell us the reason. One can only surmise. Probably, though Jesus was looked up to as a rabbi, He did not immediately assume that it was proper for Him to be a judge, not having been formally recognized by the religious hierarchy as a rabbi.¹³ Or perhaps because it was not part of His mission to try to change the structure of the civil laws of Israel as embodied in the Torah. He said He came to fulfil the Law, not to abolish it (Lk 24:44; Mt 5:17). Jesus also said that He came to seek and save the lost (Lk 19:10). He did not come simply to settle civil disputes; He had a much higher calling. As Stacy asserts,

The brother in Luke 12:13 is not a poor, disaffected person whose cause Jesus can step up to champion. The dispute is about money, not persons, and Jesus seems to have very little interest in money *per se*. Jesus' belief in the Kingdom of God and the radical reorientation of life it brings was so central to his teaching that he regards disputes over furniture and dishes and silverware as irrelevant.¹⁴

The Lord saw the man's real problem. "What this individual needed was not some casuistic legal ruling by a religious teacher but a basic understanding of how possessions relate to the purpose of life."¹⁵ The

¹¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Rev. ed., Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 164; Stacy, 286.

¹²Stacy, 286.

¹³Stein, 351; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke*, fifth ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 322.

¹⁴Stacy, 286; cf. Stein, 351; Childers, 521.

¹⁵Stein, 350.

Lord also saw the real motive of the man. He was consumed by greed.¹⁶ “Greed is to be rejected, for the meaning and purpose of life is not found in the accumulation of wealth and possessions.”¹⁷

John Nolland offers a very good insight on the reason why the Lord refused the man’s request. He says it is most likely that Jesus turned down the man’s appeal because he was usurping Jesus’ authority for his personal gain. In other words, he was attempting to use the status and authority of Jesus to satisfy his covetousness.¹⁸ The pronouncement in verse 15 confirms this. Malina and Rohrbaugh hold that behind this verse is “the traditional peasant assumption that greed is invariably the underlying motive of anyone able to gain a surplus.”¹⁹ This is due to the fact that in ancient Palestine, the people’s idea of goods is that they are limited, and have already been distributed. Therefore, if one acquired more, it meant that someone’s piece of the pie got smaller. The individual enjoyed a surplus at someone else’s expense; thus, he was not being fair. “An honorable man would thus be interested only in what was rightfully his and would have no desire to gain anything more, that is, to take what was another’s.”²⁰ That is why to be rich in those days said a lot more about one’s morality than one’s economic status. Commonly, people thought of the rich as greedy.²¹

Literary Structure and Exegesis

Verses 13-14 set the stage and provide the setting for the narration of the parable. As mentioned above, Jesus used the occasion as a springboard to teach the disciples about the right attitude towards wealth or material possessions. Verse 13 also links the following discourses to the preceding discourse (vv.1-12), making it part of the larger context of chapter 12. It is interesting to note in verse 13 that the word used in Greek for “tell” is

¹⁶Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2 Vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 969.

¹⁷Stein, 351; thus, the proverb in verse 15.

¹⁸John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 685.

¹⁹Malina and Rohrbaugh, 359.

²⁰Malina and Rohrbaugh, 324.

²¹Malina and Rohrbaugh, 324-325, 359.

εἶπεν. This is in the imperative. Therefore, the man is commanding Jesus to actually order his brother to divide the inheritance with him. He did not make a request that Jesus act as judge; he was giving a command to the Lord. It was ironic because the fact that he approached Jesus with this issue tells the readers that in a way, he respected the authority of Jesus. However, the way he spoke to Jesus was anything but respectful. In answering the man, Jesus uses the vocative of ἄνθρωπος,” which is ἄνθρωπε. According to Fitzmyer, “it is a rebuking term, implying aloofness.”²²

Verse 15 is the transitional statement of the parable. Many scholars believe that this passage was not really Jesus’ own statement, but was a Lukan addition.²³ Nevertheless, one can say that this is Jesus’ main point in the parable. Knowing the man’s real motive, Jesus warns the disciples and the multitudes against greed. He reinforces this by saying that it does not follow that if one has an abundance of goods, one’s life is secure, and that he or she will enjoy a meaningful and fulfilling life. The statement is very profound and it is quite difficult to understand at first. That is why the parable was given.

In verses 16-21, Jesus illustrates the teaching of verse 15. The story qualifies as a tragedy. The similarity of its theme with some OT passages, namely, Eccl. 2:1-11; Job 20:20; 31:24-28; and Ps 62:10, enabled Jesus to immediately connect with the people because it was familiar to them.²⁴

Verse 16 is the introduction. It presents the main character—the rich man—and his situation. He had a farm and it yielded an abundant harvest. The plot of the story begins at verse 17. A situation is brewing. Harvest is coming and the barns are not sufficient to hold all the produce. Apparently, it was a good year for the man. His farm is going to bring forth more than the usual, and he had no place to store it. “What shall I do?” he asks himself.

The plot is developed in verses 18-19. This part is the body of the story. One can sense that the story is moving towards a climax. The rich man, concerned only with himself, opts to keep all the produce for his future needs. In the modern context, it would be like investing money for his retirement. The preponderance of the first person singular pronoun in

²²Fitzmyer, 969. Plummer makes the same comment, see Plummer, 322

²³Nolland, 684-685; Fitzmyer, 968.

²⁴Malina and Rohrbaugh, 359.

these verses shows the man's self-centeredness. Plummer holds that the fact that the word **καθελω** (the future of **καθαίρω**, meaning "I pull down") is placed at the onset of the sentence emphasizes the eagerness of the man to tear down his old, small barn in order to build a bigger one that will hold all the fruits of the harvest for himself.²⁵ At the end of verse 19, there is some suspense. Implicitly, this question is posed: Did he do the right thing? What is going to happen to him now?

Verse 20 is the climax of the story. Apparently, the man made the wrong decision. He took the wrong turn, now he is trapped; he is in a dead end. The Lord called him a fool. All the things he has stored for himself are of no use to him now because his life is going to be taken from him.

Stacy provides an insightful observation of the original words in this verse *vis-à-vis* most translations in the Bible. In most Bible translations, it is not very clear who took the man's life. Readers get the impression that God did it but Stacy holds that in the Greek, the subject of the sentence is implicitly in the third person plural—that is, "they." And "they" refers to the produce of the land, the things the man had been so concerned to keep for himself alone that he had to build bigger barns in order to store them all. Therefore, the proper translation, according to Stacy, should be: "*They* are demanding your very life from you."

Hence, the point here is that "all the 'stuff' the rich man thought he owned actually owns him!" His wealth controlled him. The rich man worked hard to gain all he could and save all he has gained so that in the future he could enjoy them. But no sooner then he got all these things, his life became no longer relaxing and fun. He had to embark on a new construction project for bigger barns, and while these were being built, he had to think of how to secure them for the meantime. And when everything was done, he had to think about how to improve the security, and other concerns.²⁶ The things he thought were blessings became a curse because of his wrong attitude towards them. He would not have had to bother himself with these if he had only seen them as an added opportunity to bless others. Stacy believes that the main message of the parable is to teach about life and what secures it. He says we were not made to "run on" wealth or material possessions but rather to "run on" God. Our life and security are in God not in our savings account or investments.²⁷

²⁵Plummer, 324.

²⁶Stacy, 288.

²⁷Stacy, 289-291.

The last verse is the application. Jesus strengthens the point He made in verse 15. Indeed, if people will try to find life and hope and security in things or wealth, they will be disappointed. They will reap pain, suffering, and even destruction.

Message For Today

In the modern world, which is characterized by ever increasing secularism, individualism and materialism, George Hubbard's perspective of the message of the Parable of the Rich Fool speaks powerfully. He asks this question: what made the rich man a fool in God's eyes? Or why did God call him a fool? If we look at him using today's modern standards, we could call him a practical man. After all, he worked hard; he did not gain his wealth through illegal or immoral means. In fact, his farm provided jobs for others. And he was wise to save for his future. Yet, he was a fool before God. Why? Because he wisely provides for his body but not for his soul. Hubbard puts it so simply yet effectively:

He was wise to secure himself against material want for the time which would probably be his. There was no folly in this. There was every probability that he would live for many years, and he was wise to prepare for that. But while that was only a probability, there was the positive certainty that his soul would live through all eternity, and he was a thriftless fool to make no provision for that... Wise to foresee and supply the needs of the body; fool to imagine that the soul can be fed with corn and wheat.²⁸

In our world today, it is very easy to get caught up in the race for more and more things. People think that there is life in the acquisition of wealth because it provides security, hope and fulfilment. But what is life? Is it the life here on earth or is it the life beyond? Jesus says eternal life is knowing God (Jn 10:10); security is in giving (Prov 11:24); and true hope and fulfilment are in God (Jer 17:7-8; Ps 146; 1 Chron 4:10; Eph 3:17-19). Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Mt. 16:24-26; Mk. 8:34-36; Lk. 9:23-25).

²⁸George H. Hubbard, *The Teachings of Jesus in Parables* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1907), 436-437.

This parable also teaches us about the function of wealth or possessions in our life: they are not only for us, not for our benefit alone; our wealth and possessions are meant for others as well (1 Chron. 29:3-4; Mt.6:1-4; 19:21; Acts 2:45; 4:32-36;11:29). We work hard not because we want to enrich ourselves with material things but to provide for the needs of those who depend on us: our families and loved ones; other people—the needy, the disprivileged, the disabled, the poor in our community. God wills that we help these kinds of people with our resources, even financial resources (Mk. 10:17-31).

Another lesson the parable wishes to teach disciples of Jesus today is to have a heavenly perspective of life here on earth. Indeed, true disciples of Jesus Christ understand that the lives they live here have eternal repercussions. They do not live for this life only but also for the life beyond death, which is what really matters the most. They understand that they are just pilgrims here on earth. Their real home and treasures are in heaven not in this world.

The value of savings is also put in perspective here. If we think that the best investment is in the businesses of this world, we are mistaken. Rather, it is in God's business. Stocks, bonds, treasury bills, and savings accounts will indeed give us earthly dividends but our investment in God's business (helping the poor and the sick, missions, and compassionate ministries) will yield us eternal, heavenly blessings.

Indeed, this parable is a treasury of eternal truths and lessons. And it speaks significantly and relevantly to the people of today, who have been caught up in materialism more than any generation in history. We will all do well to draw from this spiritual storehouse and feed our souls with spiritual food than with material things. May we all heed and obey God's Word for us in this wonderful parable.