

JULY 31, 2022 | LUKE 12:13-21

# SAFER STOREROOMS



# *SAFER STOREROOMS*

LUKE 12:13-21

It is difficult, this summer, not to have money on our minds. Whether it's the high, erratic price of fuel or the challenge of grocery shopping and the sticker shock when buying ordinary staples, buying what we need has turned into an unpleasant, even stressful experience. Even beyond our ordinary day-to-day spending, the cost of a loan or mortgage is sky-rocketing and the interest on investments is plummeting...these are financially tumultuous times. Times like these increase the economic divide between the richest and poorest members of our society; but many of us are caught somewhere in between, doing our best to make good decisions for tomorrow, and live wisely and well today.

We talk about money as “cold, hard, cash,” as numbers and percentages, shares and dividends. But finances are invested with memory and emotion, too; our spending and saving, our general attitude towards material wealth - or lack of it - are very much matters of the heart. Money is almost always about more than money, and how we speak about it and use it often reveals our deepest fears and weaknesses, and sometimes, our best selves and our faith.

Certainly, in the conversation Jesus had with the man in the crowd, hearts were revealed as money matters were discussed.

The question Jesus was asked was about inheritance, clearly an argument between brothers about their father's estate after his death. In the same way that, last week, priests were healthcare officials, well, rabbis - teachers of the law - were responsible for settling legal questions.

The general rule was not to divide one's estate evenly among one's children; rather, the eldest son would get the greater share among the boys, daughters would get a sum of money settled upon them for their marriage, and from there, things would just get more complicated, as whether or not some sons had children came into play, or if dividing the estate was to be delayed for some reason.

Inheritance was a complicated business, and asking for a legal consultation, especially if you wanted a bit more than was strictly due to you, was expected.

Asking Jesus this question was not out-of-line; but Jesus was no ordinary teacher, and he gives no ordinary answer.

A lot of what Jesus taught was about internalizing the law: taking the rules for holy living, the higher standard of love and faith and commitment that Jesus preached, and sinking them deep into our hearts and minds. That way, we'd know what to do and how to respond in a faithful, Christ-imitating way in all kinds of situations.

So although Jesus refused to answer the question specifically, he uses a very memorable parable to teach more deeply about matters of money and the heart.

A rich man with a lot of cropland had a bumper year. He's no simple farmer; he's a wealthy man, who already has several barns; we can assume he must also employ people, too, to plant and tend and harvest his crops. His large harvest poses a problem for him: what to do with it all? His existing barns can't hold it, so he decides that the best solution to his problem of abundance is to tear down his old barns and build new, bigger ones. That way, he'll be all set for years to come. He can relax, eat, drink and be merry, because his days of worrying about his crops and his finances are over, at least for several years, maybe longer.

But God says, "you fool!"

The man, all unknowing, is going to die that very night. And what, God asks, will become of all you've saved? In the parable, God does not seem impressed or pleased with what the rich man has decided to do.

There is a biblical precedent for the rich man's decision to store his great harvest, one that all of Jesus' listeners and Christians since then would know about. Way back in the Old Testament, do you remember the story of how Joseph, with his beautiful, multi-coloured coat, so irritated his older brothers that they acted in such a way that led to Joseph being taken off into Egypt? He ended up a counsellor to the pharaoh of Egypt. When Pharaoh had a strange dream that no one could make sense of, Joseph correctly identified it as a warning that several years of drought and famine were ahead. He then advised Pharaoh to start storing away any excess from the harvest, building storage facilities and stockpiling food for the lean years that were coming. So storing up extra resources for a rainy day...or a drought...is good. A God-inspired thing to do, sometimes.

The problem was with what was in the rich man's heart, not with what was in his barns.

Both men, actually, the one focused on the inheritance he wanted but did not yet have, and the one focused on resources he did have and wanted to enlarge, they are both afflicted with the same problem: they are distracted by their single-minded focus on what they want for themselves. And more is at stake here than how much one has or how one chooses to manage their wealth.

The rich man in Jesus' parable, without even considering otherwise, thought and acted as if all of this was about him. What is it he says to himself again? My crops, my barn, my grain, my goods; my soul that gets to relax, eat, drink and be merry.

That last bit is a verse from the prophet Isaiah actually: "But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! 'Let us eat and drink,'" the rich man stops there. But the verse doesn't and neither does Jesus: "for tomorrow we die!"

But whether he acknowledges it or not, there are implications for the community in which the rich man lived. A clever politically-minded person might point out that infrastructure projects - like building all-new, bigger and better barns - do infuse the local economy with jobs and cash. But...what about all those field workers who helped him harvest? No bonus for them. What about the people with whom every good Jew and every faithful Christian are tasked by love to care for: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the foreign refugee? No jobs or food for them.

And what about next year? What if there's a poor harvest? The rich man will get even richer, because everyone else will be dependent on his food and the price he decides to charge for it.

The rich man, like the inheritance-demanding brother, forgot about the people around him: about those he is charged to care for, those most in need, and he's forgotten his neighbours, too: he is not loving his neighbour as himself. The rich man is going to spend the next few years in luxury and stress-free living, or at least he thinks he is; his neighbours, at best, will be no better off because of his bumper crop.

You might be thinking, well, that's his right. It's the rich man's decision what he does with his harvest, and the wealth and security it gives him. Only...it's not. Not at all.



Because the rich man has forgotten something even more important than the people around him. He's forgotten God.

The widely-held belief back then was that a rare bumper crop, an unexpectedly huge harvest, was a generous blessing from God. Right from the start in Jesus' parable, the rich man viewed his harvest not as a blessing, but as a problem to be solved to his own advantage. No thought for God at all.

And without God, any love for neighbour or service to those in need can fall by the wayside pretty quickly, especially in the face of extraordinary wealth.

Jesus' conversation and parable illustrate a kingdom-centred view of money and resources, and that view can be summed up with one word: stewardship. Stewardship of what God gives us is a theme woven throughout the story of the Bible, from the creation story right through into the New Testament, where there are conversations about money and resources, and the ethical, Christian use of both.

Saving for future material needs is one component of good stewardship of God's bounty, whether that's wealth held by nations, churches, or individuals. But we must always balance that saving habit with other demands: caring for others and providing for our neighbours and those in need, and always, giving glory and gratitude to God.

The rich man in Jesus' parable has forgotten both God - who caused the bounty in the first place - and his neighbours who don't have access to the same wealth, security and resources that he does. The same forgetful, self-focused heart is also apparent in the question about inheritance that the man in the crowd asked Jesus.

Jesus advises, in the end, that we become rich toward God.

This incident and the parable that follows, here in Luke 12, are part of a much larger series of stories and events that all teach about distraction and focus, trust in God and good stewardship of all our resources: food, clothing, money, time, and energy.

Extending across four chapters of the Gospel of Luke, we read of the parable of the Good Samaritan, a very familiar story teaching us about setting aside prejudice to help others. We read of Mary and Martha, the tension between different ways within a family of wanting to serve and the need to focus on Jesus most of all. We read about prayer and good gifts from God, about God not forgetting even the two-a-penny sparrows in the marketplace, let alone us. And we read that we are not to worry about our needs: that God provides abundantly through creation, and through his people, citizens of his kingdom here on earth; that God knows what we need.

Taken together, Jesus' collection of teachings draws a detailed and comprehensive blueprint of how we are to think and act in difficult, awkward, emotionally-charged situations: like encountering an outsider in need, butting heads with family over work and faith, reaching out to God and trusting that he will act somehow to help us, even making the seemingly worldly decisions about how to manage our wealth and resources.

Everything is God's; and the depth of care he exercises through what he's made, the love and generosity we experience, the bumper crops and the advance preparation for years of drought alike...in all of this, how could we ever forget God? Or forget to try to be the people he created us to be?

St. Augustine, the famous Christian philosopher of the 4th century AD, reflected on this parable, and wrote that "[the rich man] did not realize that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns." Whether we are people of wealth and means or if we struggle to make ends meet, watching anxiously as costs rise and the stock market tumbles, this parable calls for careful reflection on what we want and why we want it.

There are a lot of attitudes toward money that we could have, many of them complex, shaped by past experiences and family history as much as current needs and market conditions.

We may be driven by a determination to store up treasures for our own security and pleasure, like the rich man, so we, too, can relax, eat, drink and be merry, forgetting God and forgetting those people in our world whom God calls us to provide for.

We may be driven by past memories of poverty, of times when we were desperate or afraid or powerless, of never wanting to feel that way again.

Our thinking about money might be driven by envy, by fear of missing out, by a desire to look like we're living our best life for all to see.

Or our attitude toward money may be influenced by our awareness of God's blessings and our true purpose as his people, as his followers, at this moment in our world.

Jesus' parable is also valuable for us today because it helps us look at and understand the 'why' behind the economic situation in the world around us: forgetting God and all that Jesus taught us about focus and the content of the heart; forgetting the loving duty of caring for one another, instead putting money and acquiring it first, ahead of family, neighbour, and community.

Our world's economic situation is very like the two men in our reading, writ large across the globe: people concerned with getting everything they think they're owed, regardless of any hurt or trouble it causes others; and people who have so much more than they need, yet would rather build bigger barns to store it in than fill the bellies of the poor.

When Jesus taught about money and wealth, it was never a question of spend or invest, give or save. Instead, Jesus always asked, what is in your heart when you make those decisions? Is it God, and gratefully honouring him? Is it your neighbour in need? Or is it yourself, like the rich man who was a fool: my crops, my barn, my grain, my goods; my soul that gets to relax, eat, drink and be merry.

At the end of the day, money is a gift like any other we receive from God, not an end in itself. What we choose to do with that gift, together or for ourselves, it reveals the content of our hearts. God's economic plan for us is vastly more simple than anything you'll read in the news or hear from our leaders today. There's really only three considerations for being a good steward of what God entrusts to us: return glory and gratitude to God, give to care for our neighbours, and save wisely for future needs.

But all three feed into each other, too: we cannot care for our neighbour without giving glory to God or without saving wisely; we cannot save wisely without also taking God and neighbour into consideration. And we cannot honour God and respond gratefully to him without becoming rich toward him: what we do for others in Christ's name we do for God. Jesus encouraged us to be rich toward God first: we will become rich indeed if we use what belongs to God in ways that turn and re-turn that blessing back toward him. Thanks be to God! Amen.