

Luke 12:13-21
August 4, 2019

Wealth

When I was twelve my family moved from one neighborhood to another and I found myself in a new school at which there was only one person that I had previously known. He was a friend from the church in which I had grown up.

The new school was separated by a stand of trees from what he called a Ryder plant. I had thought he meant that they made Ryder trucks there, but undoubtedly they only kept and maintained them. He loved the trucks.

“If I had a million dollars I would buy a big rig,” he said, and I can no longer remember if it was Mack or International Harvester that he liked the best. I could never say what I would have done if I had a million dollars. A million dollars is not worth as much as it once was. Maybe the question needs to be changed. What would you do if you had a hundred million dollars, a billion?

Wealth

Every now and again it is good to comment on the spiritual issues that always challenge believers and unbelievers alike. I am not referring to the “issues of the day,” but universal issues, things that are relevant no matter the day. Today the issue is the place of wealth in the scheme of things, and the related topics of greed and materialism.

Whether we like it or not, rich or poor, or somewhere in the middle, there are commonly held notions shared by people everywhere and in all times connecting meaning, joy, and peace, with economic security, the accumulation of material possessions, power.

This value system is so enmeshed even in the life depicted in the bible and in the church that it is almost impossible to sort out the good from the bad, the right from the wrong. Yet it is necessary to try because spiritual health, and that means health in general, is dependent upon our ability to escape this notion, unlike the proclaimers of the “prosperity gospel” claim, and live as the scriptures teach, that, “life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.”

Paul and the things Above

In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul addresses this very issue by distinguishing between the things above, in heavenly things, and the things below, earthly things. He admonishes all of us to set our minds on the heavenly things. After all, heaven is where Christ is, where we are headed. He tells us to “put to death” whatever belongs to the earthly nature.

Then he makes a list, not inclusive, but representative enough for today: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which his idolatry. One gets the impression that he is lumping them all together for a reason. Then the list continues: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language, and dishonesty.

He says we have taken off our old selves and put on a new self, being renewed all the time. He says there are no distinctions; "no Jew nor Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, Barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

The larger point is that faith in Christ sets us in opposition to the set of values that place too high an emphasis on material life. Greed is a catch-all word which means that material life *is all there is* and one must be well-established in it to know joy and peace, *and meaning*. It reflects the idea that *meaning comes* from earthly life.

Here there are also no distinctions. If Christ is in all, then so is sin. Materialism and greed are universal and no more so than among Christians of all stripes; liberal and conservative, progressive and evangelical, Republican and Democrat. We are all vulnerable. We are all threatened. We are all guilty. We are all human.

The Parable

The biblical conviction is that life does *not* consist in any way of the abundance of possessions. The Parable of the Rich Fool serves as an illustration. There was a man who owned a farm and raised up a good crop. In order to store it he tore down his barns and build bigger ones. He had his millions. He realized that he was set for awhile, had enough for many years so he decided to take it easy, sit by the pool, "eat, drink, and be merry," as the expression goes.

Now there are a number of ways in which this rich farmer seems to have lost his way. Mainly, he seems to be unaware of the community of people in which he lived. He is a producer of food, yet there is no mention of any realization that food is a necessity of life and his ability to produce it connected him to the needs of the larger human family. *He is storing it!* There seems to be no concern for *any other person than* himself.

But the parable does not condemn him for the neglect of his neighbors. It uses a different tactic. Instead it accuses him of being unaware of life's brevity, and its precariousness. "You fool," he is very sharply reprimanded. "This very night your life is demanded of you (this means that physical death came). Who then will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

Rich Toward God

Then the punchline. "This is how it will be for anyone who stores up things for himself, but is not rich toward God."

We are all involved in material life, for the time being it cannot be escaped. It demands our attention every day. It is expensive and must be paid for, and much of our waking life is spent earning enough to cover the cost. If we are blessed, our vocations combine meaningful, or at least necessary work with enough compensation to stay in the black ink, or close to it, if we are mindful of our spending. Some accumulate wealth.

Everyone who has a little more than is needed spends the excess somehow. Some store it up. Some spend it on an “eat, drink, and be merry” lifestyle. Some do both, like the man in the parable. No one escapes having to deal with it. Those who give no attention to any other concern except themselves end up becoming human caricatures, unable to function. We use words like sociopath and psychopath.

But how does one overcome the temptation of the rich fool? The parable uses the phrase, “rich towards God.” What does it mean to be rich towards God? To use Paul’s terms, it means putting off the old self. And in spite of all the other words Paul uses, which are valuable words and must be heeded, today’s word for what must be set aside, is greed. Among the other words, it fits the rich fool best.

If we are to be generous, kind, selfless, and whatever is the opposite of greedy, we must have a life focus other than the self. The self must be replaced.

There really is no substitute for a thriving relationship with God; the God who has made us, the God who has loved us, and the God who has redeemed us, the only one with whom a relationship brings about in us the virtues that we seek and are needed most, and then directs us towards their use in ways that *are* in fact, helpful to others. This relationship, initiated by God through Christ, is wealth toward God. All the rest is secondary.

We know the name of some of the richest people in history, Carnegies, Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, Gates, Bezos, Buffet. Sometimes they set up charitable foundations to serve others; put computers in every classroom, fight hunger and poverty, cure disease, send someone to Mars. For most of us it is an academic question, for we will never see that much. What would I do if I had a million dollars? I still don’t know.

But I know that whether one has way too much or nothing at all, the pursuit of wealth as a means to meaning in life is misguided. And what must be kept in mind is that we are all corrupted by the belief that it will meet a deep spiritual need that it can’t meet. I won’t keep one from dying; it won’t transform the heart or renew the mind; it won’t forgive sin; it won’t help ones neighbor, unless it is somehow let go.

Perhaps what I should have asked my friend is, “what do you want to do with the trucks?” That is a question worth asking?

[Back](#)

[Home](#)