

THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

Text: Luke 12:13-21

By: Rev Dr Leo Douma

Date: 19th March, 2017

Steve Farrar in his book 'Family Survival in the American Jungle' wrote this satirical prayer: 'Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray my expensive art to keep. I pray my stocks are on the rise, and that my analyst is wise. That all the wine I sip is white, and that my hot tub is watertight. That racquetball won't get too tough, that all my sushi's fresh enough. I pray my cordless phone still works, that my career won't lose its perks. My microwave won't radiate, my investment flat won't depreciate. I pray my health club doesn't close and that my money market grows. If I go broke before I wake, I pray my Volvo they won't take.' Compare that with Psalm 63:1-6 *"You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night."*

What do you long for the most? Who or what gives you security? Where do you put your trust? A lot of people dream about winning millions in a Powerball jackpot. They fantasize that then all their worries will be over. But would that actually be the case? Research shows 1 out of 3 lottery winners go bankrupt within three years. And a majority experience damage in their relationships. In this parable of the rich fool we

see a man gets a sudden windfall of wealth. But it doesn't prove to be a positive experience either.

Jesus told this parable because he was rudely interrupted. He had been teaching his disciples while a huge crowd had gathered around him. He had been dealing with very serious spiritual stuff. Like fearing God who can still deal with you in hell. Like not blaspheming against the Spirit because those who do will not be forgiven. Like trusting the Spirit to give you the words when hauled before the authorities. Then out of the blue (:13) "*Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.'*" It was completely off topic. He wasn't thinking about the deeply spiritual stuff. He had something else foremost in mind. Money. And lots of it. There was a major dispute in the family over the inheritance. He was so one tracked about it he just butted in as Jesus was teaching. Now a rabbi was expected to be knowledgeable about the law and ready to give a legal ruling. But this man was not asking Jesus to arbitrate. He was virtually ordering Jesus. He had made up his mind and wanted to use Jesus to get what he wanted. His very manner revealed the sort of greedy character he was.

You can well understand Jesus' gruff response. (:14) Jesus replied, "*Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?*" Saying "O man..." in the Middle East expressed a tone of irritation or complaint. Jesus just refused to get involved. He would not be party to satisfy the greed of the man. He was not sent by God to bring money to people. He was sent to bring people to God. In that capacity he sensed a very dangerous attitude here. Something that then, and still, get's in the way of people coming to God. So Jesus get's straight to the point. (:15) "*Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions'*". Jesus states an important principle here. A person cannot guarantee the quality of their life, or even the length of their life, by how much they possess. No matter how much wealth you have to cannot buy life. Even the richest of people die of sickness or accident or old age. As T.W. Manson once wrote 'It is true that a certain minimum of

material goods is necessary for life. But it is not true that a greater abundance of goods means greater abundance of life'. I know that to be a fact. Some of the richest people I have pastorally related with were the most unhappy. But that is not always easily seen. The problem is that 'greed' is blinding. The Greek word here means an 'insatiable desire'. No matter how much you have you crave more. It is an uncontrollable urge. You want all these things to be yours! In other words you become possessed by your possessions! That's why Jesus says 'Watch out! Be on your guard. Defend yourself from your own greed!

Having stated the key principle Jesus tells a parable to illustrate it. Like so much of what Jesus said the parable's theme has a background in the Old Testament, like Psalm 49 and Ecclesiastes 5. (:16 &17) *"And he told them this parable: 'The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'" We see it's a story about a man who is already wealthy. And then on top of that he enjoys a bumper crop. Jesus gives him no credit for the crop. He didn't plan on it or work towards it. Jesus says '...the land produced abundantly'. So this abundance is an extra gift from God. Jesus is saying the man has a huge surplus. So now he sees himself as having a problem. What is he going to do with it all?*

Using creative story telling Jesus lets us overhear the man's thoughts. The man debates with himself. (:18&19) *"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" When we look carefully at what the rich man says we get a clear insight into what he is like and how he thinks. Notice it's all about 'my barns, my grain, my crops'. It's all mine. Notice how often he says 'I will'. 'I will do this. I will tear down my barns. I will build larger ones. I will store my grain'. He sees himself as a self made man. He is very sure of himself and what he will do with his possessions.*

Now notice the most notable thing about his little speech. He talks to himself. His big flaw is that he has shut out everyone else from his life. Even God. He is a lonely selfish man preoccupied with all his possessions. He has a major decision to make with all his surplus grain. But he doesn't take advice from anyone. He doesn't pray about it. In a Middle Eastern culture that would have been seen as weird. They were not individuals in those days. They lived in tightly knit communities. The leading men of the village would sit at the gate and speak for hours about the slightest issue. Men in those communities did their thinking in the crowd. They always talked it through with lots of others.

He doesn't think about anyone else either. His only thought is about how he can hoard up this extra wealth and relax, 'eat drink and be merry'. He doesn't even seem to think of inviting others to join him in the merry making. The thought of giving to others never crosses his mind. The thought of sharing his extra wealth or even investing in worthy projects never dawns on him. He did not regard his surplus as being extra he didn't need that God gave for a reason. His 'insatiable desire', his 'greed' had eaten away any sense of service to God or compassion for others. He thought it all belonged to him. And he that had every right to us it exclusively for his own pleasure. Jesus is giving us a picture of the kind of prison that wealth can build. The rich man has the money to buy a vacuum and live in it. This little speech by the rich man is not just sad. It's pitiful. As one commentator put it 'He thinks the total needs of a total person can be met by material surpluses well preserved for his exclusive use'. He is self confident. He has made it. But he is all alone. He has no one to share it with.

Then Jesus brings home the punch line in his parable. The average listener in that crowd would have thought 'Yes, wouldn't it be great to be that rich man with all that wealth'. Then in the parable God interrupts the man's retirement plans. (: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?'* There is a lovely word play in the Greek. The word for surplus is 'euphreo'. The word for good life is 'euphron'. And the word for fool is

'aphron'. So the rich man thinks his euphreo (riches') will produce 'euphron' (the good life) when in reality it is 'aphron' (sheer stupidity!). In the Bible the word 'fool' refers to those people who live their lives as if God does not exist. But as Richard Foster once said 'When we lack a divine centre our need for security leads us to an insane attachment to things.' That's why there are warnings in the Bible. Psalm 62:10 says "*If riches increase, do not set your heart on them.*" Proverbs 11:28 reminds us that "*Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves.*" Jesus was not saying that wealth in itself was wrong. Nor that the people who have wealth are wrong. It's that having great wealth becomes a great temptation to trust in them rather than God. It is not coincidental that we are the richest we have ever been in Australia and the most non religious. When we are well off it is so easy to think who needs God?

But here the parable hits home. God says to the rich man 'your life is demanded from you'. The Greek there is a word that means the 'return of a loan'. In other words the rich man's life was on loan and now the owner wants the loan returned. So not only was the abundant crop a gift. But the rich man's life was not his own either. So the idea that 'it's my life and I'll do what I want with it' is just not true. Nor is it all 'my stuff and I'll keep it for myself to enjoy'. Your life, the very breath in your lungs, is a gift from God. You are called to serve him and help bring in the kingdom. That is not a kill joy. That is how we discover the true meaning and value in life. It is as we give generously of ourselves and what God has provided that we discover the true joy and purpose to life. In loving God with all we are and our neighbour as ourselves we really live.

We may think that when we have huge wealth we have it made. But when the insatiable desire of greed get's its addictive claws in us it destroys real joy. Listen as God in the parable says to the rich man 'Idiot! Have a good look at what you have done to yourself. You plan alone, build alone, indulge alone and now you will die alone. Surrounding yourself with all your stuff you insulated yourself from others. You were

filled to the brim with possessions but starved to death with relationships. Even relating to God. Now what happens to all your stuff?

The lesson of the parable is not just for the guy who interrupted Jesus. As Jesus said (:21) *"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."* The reason for Jesus' ministry was to bring forgiveness and make us rich toward God. The most important lesson in life is not how much money you have. No matter what your bank manager or the economists says. As important as our finances are the most important question in life is are you rich towards God? Is there a living relationship between you and God? Is your greatest desire in life God himself? Does he fulfill all your longing? Is he the trust and hope of your life? If God said I want the loan of your life returned tonight will you have hope after death? Your money won't give it to you!

Now I reckon that most of us would want to give a positive response here, that we are rich towards God. And praise God for that. But let's not be naive. We need to *"watch out and be on guard against all kinds of greed"* as Jesus said. Because our whole economy is built on a passion for things. And if we wane in our passion the advertisers will do their utmost to rekindle that passion. We are told daily that happiness comes in this or that new product. We are already subtly possessed by our possessions. Think of the amount of time it takes to maintain all our stuff. Think of the pleasure we get when we clean and polish and think 'this is mine!' Our children will observe us spending hours tending to the house or car or garden. Do they also see us relating to God, being in prayer, teaching them the faith, demonstrating a caring, giving attitude in the church and community? Do they see in us an attitude of trust in God or in the money we have? When we look at our church budget will we be limited in what we can do? Or will we greatly encourage each other by giving more than we need so we can be generous to the community.

This parable gives us a chance to ponder an area in our lives that is a real threat in our current culture. It is vital to see that life is more than about what we possess. It's about being rich towards God and generous towards others.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- Jesus tells us to 'be on guard' against the 'insatiable desire' of 'greed'. How might you do that when you also need to provide well for your family?
- Jesus said 'Life does not consist of the abundance of possessions'. How do you respond to that given our culture is so rich in possessions?
- How can we maintain a 'richness towards God' in our lives and ensure we are not isolated from God and others?