

A Rich and Worried Fool

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a five-part series

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Luke 12:13–31 (NIV)

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

¹⁴Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”

¹⁵Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

¹⁶And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷He 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 my surplus grain. ¹⁹And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain 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?’

²¹“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

²²Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. ²³For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. ²⁴Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! ²⁵Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?

²⁶Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

²⁷“Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ²⁸If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. ³⁰For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

“What, Me Worry?” Sure . . . as if we aren’t often consumed by worries and anxieties. But Jesus calls us to a very different life.

We save. We accumulate. We build bigger and bigger barns. But what’s all the stuff for? What good is it in the end? For the end always comes. Sadly, much sooner than expected for some. Steve Jobs had more toys and more money than almost anyone on the planet. Would he not gladly have given all that up to be alive now?

Jesus told it like it is. I suppose many thought he was quite politically incorrect, though they hadn’t coined the term. Then as now, frankness and honesty can go down hard. “Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions,” Jesus told a group one day. Then he told them a story about a fool and his imagined “security.”

It is a short parable and pretty straightforward. As I gathered background material on the passage, I came across a commentary on it by Darrell Bock, who you sometimes see on Discovery Channel or National Geographic specials on the Bible. I thought he had some especially good points to make. Here is some of his analysis:

. . . The ancients knew, as moderns also know, that life consists of more than the accumulation of wealth. Scripture repeatedly warns against greed and includes it in lists of moral vices (Mk 7:22; Rom 1:29; Eph 4:19; 5:3; Col 3:5; 1 Tim 6:10; 2 Pet 2:3, 14; in the Old Testament, Job 31:24–25; Ps 49). The ancient historian Plutarch said, “Greed never rests from the acquiring of more” (*On Love of Wealth* 1 [Mor. 523 E]; L. T. Johnson 1991:198).

When possessions are the goal, people become pawns. In fact, a reversal of the created order occurs, as those made in the living image of God come to serve dead “non-images.” It is this inversion of the created order that makes greed such a notorious sin; it is even called idolatry in some texts (Eph 5:3; Col 3:5). When I think of this story and its lesson, I picture a Buddha with a dollar attached to its stomach. For some, the material world is god. Many of us end up serving our dollars and bowing before their demands rather than relating sensitively to people. In the process relationships can be damaged and marriages destroyed. False worship involves bowing before something that is not worthy of honor and that cannot deliver life’s true meaning. The pursuit of wealth is the pursuit of false religion.

So Jesus tells an example parable, in which the example is negative. It involves the fortune of one man and how he handles that fortune. The man remains nameless, as is the normal pattern in such parables, because he represents a type of person. This farmer has a banner crop year. So great is the yield that he lacks storage space for it all. Rather than letting his resources waste away, he devises a plan to create more storage space. Now it is crucial to realize that the decisions the man makes to address his dilemma are perfectly normal and prudent, but the rationale, philosophy and desires that result from the decision are the problem.

This man believes that what he has is his in no uncertain terms. Several times in the next few verses he speaks in first-person terms about what he has: *my crops ... my barns ... my grain ... my goods ... myself*. There is no hint of an awareness of stewardship or responsibility to others as a result of his fortune. There is only self-interest. In his view he, like the famous American investment company, has made money the old-fashioned way—he has earned it! So after he stores his grain, he can relax into a totally self-indulgent life of ease: “*Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.*” The language recalls the biblical and Jewish texts of hedonism, as well as Greek culture (Eccl 8:15; Is 22:13; Tobit 7:10; *1 Enoch* 97:8–10; Euripides *Alcestis* 788–89). Almost every culture recognizes that using the creation for strictly selfish ends is a distortion. As the man contemplates his future as one of the rich and famous, God has another account to render: the man is about to join the dead and departed. When God addresses the man as *fool*, he indicates the man’s blindness in judging life’s priorities. The man’s soul is being weighed in the balance. On that scale the possessions the man has and the social résumé he has built register no weight whatsoever. He cannot take these things with him to the bar of divine justice. Only his naked character will be on that balance. The man whose life is possessions makes himself a paperweight at the final judgment. The one who defines life in terms of possessions comes up empty when the time comes to assess whether eternal life will be gained. The parable ends on a note of tragedy: “*Who will get what you have prepared for yourself?*” One thing is for sure, his treasures will not be his anymore.

Jesus underscores this tragedy as he closes the parable with a final commentary: “*This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.*” Jesus’ point is that the seeker of wealth ends up with an empty soul and an empty life. Possessions are like “lite” beer; they may taste great, but they are really less filling.

All this teaching suggests the importance of proper priorities regarding possessions. They are a stewardship, not to be hoarded selfishly but to be used to benefit those around us. Jesus is not saying possessions are bad, but that the selfish pursuit of them is pointless. When the creation is inverted, the value of possessions is distorted. Those who climb over people or ignore them in the pursuit of possessions will come up empty on the day God sorts out our lives. What a tragic misuse of the gift of resources this man had gained! What could have been an opportunity for generosity and blessing became a stumbling block to the soul.¹

¹ Bock, D. L. (1994). *Luke*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Lk 12:13). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

“Seek his kingdom”

In Luke’s telling, Jesus builds on the short parable about bigger barns to talk about the anxiety and worry that possessions create. Who needs locks? The man with a lot of possessions and wealth? Or the man with none of either? Who worries about the stock market? People with a lot invested or those who have none?

Like most of us, I’ve always concentrated on the “do not worry” theme in today’s passage from Luke. Don’t worry, don’t worry. Yeah sure, I’ve thought to myself. Perhaps that explains why I paid so little attention to the last verse: “But seek his

What’s a Parable?

Jesus often taught using parables. Indeed, more than two dozen such stories are recorded for us in the Gospels. Jesus obviously used such stories on many occasions as he sought to help people understand the kingdom of God, for that is subject of many of the parables.

A parable is a very short story with a double meaning; it is brief and metaphorical. On the surface, the parable might be about sowing or fishing, but on a deeper level, it points to something else and it challenges the hearer to discover that second meaning by thoughtful listening. C. H. Dodd gives us a classic definition that repays a close reading: “At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” In other words, we need to let Jesus’ parables surprise us and make us think!

One caution . . . the nature of the parables makes it easy for us to let our imaginations run wild. Over the centuries, Christians have done exactly that. My advice is that you let the stories be stories, don’t push them too far, and try to hear the surprise. Let the stories subvert your normal way of thinking.

kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.” I paid little attention to these words, despite this verse being the climax of the whole section!

In the preceding verses, Jesus points us toward this great truth: the kingdom of God is to be the first priority in our lives and, if so, all else will follow. Our energies and passions and devotions are to be poured into the kingdom. In the Greek, “strive” is an imperative, a must do – we are to keep striving. This is not about a hoped-for-someday coming of God’s kingdom but about its reality today, for our own lives. D.A. Hagner puts it this way in his commentary on Matthew: “This imperative means that one should make the kingdom the center of one’s existence and thus experience the rule of God fully in one’s heart.” Even this is a bit abstract for me. How do we experience God’s rule in our hearts?

The kingdom of God is exactly what the words say: it is the place where God is king, where God rules. Thus, experiencing the rule of God in our hearts is a bit like this. I am a citizen of the United States. I try as best as I can to live according to the laws of the U.S. If I move to another country, even a lawless country, I can still choose to hold the laws of the U.S. in my heart, to be governed by them even though I am no longer in the U.S. Thus, even though we live in a world that is plagued by tragedy, violence, illness, materialism, and selfishness we can choose to live according to God’s teachings. In other words, we are to keep striving to live according to God’s moral will, for that is true righteousness.

Needs and wants

Jesus says if we strive first for God’s kingdom, then “all these things will be given to you as well.” What sorts of things? What we eat. What we drink. What we wear. (v. 31). Though I doubt that Jesus had in mind a diet of bread and water and trousers made of sackcloth, I also suspect he wasn’t speaking of dinner at a four-star restaurant, Moët-Chandon, and designer clothes.

We have a way of making “wants” into seeming “needs.” To an extent, this is a good thing. Increasing standards of living have resulted in numerous benefits for millions of people. But, still, we seem to chase an unreachable goal. No matter how far along we

get, we just redefine the target further away. Somebody always has a bigger house or a more luxurious car. George Will wrote, a need “is defined in contemporary America as a 48-hour-old want,” leading to “a blurring of needs and wants.” The result is what he calls the “tyranny of the unnecessary.”²

If we are going to find our way to the good life, to the abundant life that Jesus promises and desires for us, we have to begin by recognizing that our own desires are misplaced. Too often, we seek the things of this world, whether it be stuff or status, rather than the things of God. Our journey must begin with the transformation of our minds and hearts, our desires and dreams. By the grace of God, such transformation can be ours.

The Kingdom of God

When Jesus says, “seek the kingdom of God,” what is he talking about? It is a lot less abstract than you probably think and, no, it isn’t a place in your heart. The kingdom of God is a matter of geography. It is the place where God is king. The Jews of Jesus’ day waited for the coming of this kingdom – an actual kingdom. When God again reigned, there would be no war, no hunger, no hatred, no sick, no crippled, no blind . . . and the Jews had waited for a long time.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ very first words are a blazing proclamation:

‘The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent! And believe in the Good News!’

Wow. Jesus brings the news that the wait is over, that God is doing great things, that God’s kingdom is at hand, that the Day of the Lord has come . . . that all of this is breaking in upon Israel through the ministry of Jesus himself. God’s glory was shining upon them all and the world would never be the same.

Of course, this seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. There is simply too much pain and suffering in the world to suggest otherwise. So again, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom or tell us to strive for it?

Richard Hays answers such questions this way, “Why do the powers of wickedness continue to operate effectively in this world? Because the story is not over. The climactic victory has been won on the Cross, but there is still much residual resistance. So we live in a tension-filled interval where skirmishes are still under way.” The kingdom of God is present, but not fully. We are to strive to live as if God’s kingdom is fully present, leading lives of righteousness, loving God and loving neighbor. From this will flow our heart’s true desire.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What is the good life? The farmer who builds big barns thinks he knows. You might begin by discussing what you would mean by the phrase. Then imagine that you are a public opinion researcher. What do you think most people would mean by “the Good Life?” Do you think that the responses of Christians would differ from non-Christians? How might they differ? What do you make of the fact that market researchers can find very little difference between the lives led by committed Christians (those who would say that they are trying to live as a disciple and attend church regularly) and those who are not?
2. *Striving for the kingdom of God.* This can seem so abstract. How can we make it more concrete? Discuss my analogy to living by U.S. law even in a lawless land. Is the analogy helpful? How? What do you think it means to be strive for “righteousness?” Could it be as plain as always seeking to do what is right? How do we know what is right? What does doing right have to do with achieving the Good Life? If you think of God’s Law as a list of arbitrary rules, it may be hard to see the connection between doing right and the Good Life. But if God’s Law shows us the way toward being truly human, then the connection is clearer.
3. Discuss the “tyranny of the unnecessary.” How might we more clearly distinguish between our needs and our wants? Where do we begin in the reshaping of our desires?

²Quoted in Easterbrook’s book, *The Progress Paradox*, p 136.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Monday, Exodus 35:4-29 Everyone brings their best stuff to build God's tabernacle.</p> | <p>Tuesday, Proverbs 16:16 & 17:16 A fool and his money</p> |
| <p>Wednesday, Psalm 78:1-8 Teaching our children about the faithfulness and generosity of God.</p> | <p>Thursday, Philippians 4:11-12 Learning to be content with whatever our circumstances.</p> |
| <p>Friday, Revelation 3:14-22 The Christians in Laodicea think they are wealthy for they do have lots of money. But they are fools.</p> | <p>Prayer List</p> |

