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HOW TO BE REALLY RICH

Luke 12:13-21

By

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Luke Lesson 59

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It would be interesting and revealing some day to do an exit poll to find out all the things that people had thought about during the sermon. Some of the young men were no doubt thinking, "I wonder who that beautiful babe is sitting three rows over? I wonder if she has a boyfriend? How could I meet her?" Some of the young women were thinking similar thoughts about some cute guy.

Some of the men were thinking, "I hope he gets through in time so I can catch the game on TV." Some may have been thinking about their work and an important meeting this week. Some of the women were thinking about what they would fix for dinner after church. Others were thinking about problems with their kids. Studies show that we can listen four times faster than people talk, so there's a lot of time for other thoughts while you're listening to a sermon!

I would probably take it personally that people are thinking about other things while I preach, except for the fact that people did the same thing when Jesus preached. Who am I to think that I can do better than the Lord? Jesus had just been preaching on the most solemn and weighty matters imaginable, that we need to fear God who can cast us into hell more than we fear men who can only harm our bodies. He stressed that whoever confesses the Son of Man on earth will hear Him confess them before the angels of God. He warned against the unpardonable sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. He was talking about heaven and hell. You would think that everyone in the audience would be tracking with Him on these eternally vital matters!

But just then a man in the crowd spoke up and revealed that he hadn't been listening to Jesus' sermon at all! He said, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." If I had been Jesus, I probably would have thought, "Where was this guy during my sermon?" The man was consumed with his problem and he had come to try to get Jesus to solve his problem. He wasn't there to have Jesus change his heart. He wanted his prob-

lem fixed without confronting some deeper issues of sin in his life. In his mind, his problem was his greedy brother who wasn't giving him his fair share of the inheritance. Surely, Jesus would see the injustice of this situation and right the wrong!

But instead, the man got something he hadn't bargained for! Jesus saw that his words revealed his heart. The man's heart problem was not his brother's greed, but his own greed. Yes, the brother may have also been greedy, and Jesus' parable was not just directed to the man, but to "them," which probably included the brother along with the whole crowd. But this man had his focus on getting what he wanted in *this* world. Jesus shows him that his true need was to be ready for the *next* world. So the Lord refused to take the role of judge between the man and his brother. Instead, He showed the man how to be *really* rich, namely, how to be rich toward God.

To be really rich, we must be rich toward God.

First Jesus issued a strong warning against greed. "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." Then, He told a parable to drive home the point. Jesus' warning indicates that we need constant vigilance to keep this enemy of the soul at bay. It won't happen accidentally. If you do not post a guard all day, every day, greed will creep in unawares and get a stranglehold on your life. Jesus here answers the vital question, "*How can we invest our lives wisely so as to be rich toward God?*"

1. We all have a choice about how to invest our lives.

The choice, simply put, is: Greed or God? Many might say, "Wait a minute! That's too black and white. Life isn't that neatly divided into separate categories. It's more realistic to say that we can serve God and at the same time try to get rich." But Jesus drew the line plainly when He said, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). He did not say, "should not," but "cannot." It is an impossibility to serve both masters at the same time. You must choose one or the other.

In Mark 4:19, Jesus said that the thorns that gradually grow up and choke out the word are "the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things." Greed often

isn't a deliberate choice, where a person decides, "I'm going to become a materialistic hedonist by spending my life for as much money and as many possessions as I can get." Rather, it creeps up around us without our realizing it. It gets a slow stranglehold on our lives, like thorns growing up around a healthy plant. So how can we determine if we're falling into the sin of greed?

A TEST FOR GREED:

Here are five questions to ask yourself:

(1) *Do my thoughts more often run after material things than after God Himself?* If I am often thinking about that new car or that nicer house or that better computer, and I seldom think about how I can know God better, I am tainted by greed.

(2) *Do I ever compromise godly character in the pursuit of material gain?* If I sometimes cheat or lie or steal to get ahead financially or to avoid loss, I am being greedy. If I am willing to shred relationships or to take advantage of another person for financial gain, I am being greedy. If I care more about making money than about being a witness for Jesus Christ, I am being greedy.

(3) *Do I enjoy material things more than I enjoy knowing God?* If my happiness soars when I get a new car, but I am bored by the things of God, I am greedy. If I rejoice when I win a raffle or door prize, but I yawn when I hear about a soul being saved, I am greedy.

(4) *How do I respond when I lose material things?* When the stock market drops, do I fall apart emotionally? If I get robbed or lose some or all of my things in a fire, does it devastate me? I'm not saying that we must be stoical about such losses. We will always feel some sadness when we lose things. But if it wipes us out, then we're probably too attached to this world and its goods.

(5) *What would I do if I suddenly came into a fortune?* I presume that none of you play the lottery, but what if you won the Reader's Digest Sweepstakes? What if a distant relative died and left you a large inheritance? Would your first thought be, "Now I can get that better house or car or boat"? "Now I can take that trip around the world I've always wanted to take." Or, would you think, "Now I can support dozens of missionaries"? "Thousands of people can hear about Christ because He has given me funds to invest in the spread of His kingdom!"

THE PROBLEM WITH GREED:

Some may be thinking, "What's the big problem with greed? Sure, we all know that it's wrong to live for things and to grasp after them like Scrooge. But success is the American way. As long as we're not extreme about it, can't we pursue the nice things in life?" Our text reveals three fundamental problems with greed:

(1) Greed ignores the lordship of Christ over everything.

The man in the parable saw himself as the owner of all that he had. Did you notice the prominence of the first person pronoun in his speech? Six times he says "I," without any regard for God. He refers to *my* crops, *my* barns, *my* grain, *my* goods, and, most frighteningly of all, *my* soul. He would have been in harmony with the proud and defiant words of William Henley's "Invictus," "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."

The Bible declares, "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it" (Ps. 24:1). God rightfully owns the whole works! If He lets us use any of it, He still retains the ownership and we will give an account to Him of how we used it as stewards. Our lives are not our own. We have been bought with a price. We belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. If He has given you health, you will give an account to Him for how you managed your healthy body. If He has given you intelligence, He will demand an account of how you used it for His purposes. If He entrusts material goods and money to you, someday you will answer for how you invested it in light of eternity.

The greedy man is proud. If you asked this man, "How did you get all this wealth?" he would have answered, "I got it all by hard work, using my head, and I had a little luck with the weather." But he wouldn't have acknowledged God's grace as the source of it. The greedy man is self-sufficient. His confidence was in his many barns full of produce, not in God's care. The greedy man is his own lord. He asks himself, "What shall I do?" He proudly declares, "This is what I will do." He does not ask, "Lord, what would You have me to do?"

(2) Greed ignores the priority of relationships over riches.

You don't have to read between the lines to see that this man and his brother were not best buddies at this point! The money

had come between them. How many families have been divided over the settling of the family estate! How many brothers and sisters are so angry that they won't speak to each other because they are at war over possessions or money that belonged to their parents! In this case, I presume that the man bringing the complaint had some justification for his case. His brother probably had wronged him. But Jesus confronted this man with his own greed.

The Bible is clear that the number one priority is to love God and that number two is to love our neighbor as much as we do love ourselves. Our love of money and things is just a manifestation of our love of self more than our love of God and neighbor.

(3) Greed ignores the shortness of life and the fact of eternity.

The rich man made a deliberate, thought-out decision (12:18-19), but he left out one critical factor: eternity! He had his bases covered for many years on earth, but not for eternity in heaven. Alexander Maclaren puts it, "The goods may last, but will he?" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], p. 342). Of course, he had no guarantee that even the goods would last. His barns could have been hit by lightning and burned to the ground before morning. Thieves or an invading army could have taken it all from him. Rats could have eaten and polluted his storehouses. Nothing in this life is guaranteed except death (and, perhaps, taxes!).

The rich man thought that he was being prudent. He had thought matters through carefully. But God bluntly calls him a fool. The fool thinks about life, but he doesn't include God, judgment, and eternity in his thoughts. So, at death the fool and his riches are parted for all eternity. God's voice breaks into this man's life like a thunderclap without warning: "Front and center before My throne! Give an account of how you have used what I graciously entrusted to you!" The rich fool was weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Two men were at the funeral of a wealthy man. The first man whispered to the second, "How much did he leave?" The second man replied, "He left it all!" We always do, of course!

So each of us has a choice to make about how we invest the rest of our lives: Will I serve God or will I serve greed? There's a second fact to consider regarding how to be rich toward God:

2. The world's perspective on how to invest our lives is at odds with God's perspective.

The world says that life consists of things, but God says that life consists of being rightly related to Him and to others. The world would view this rich man as a success. He would be featured in business magazines as a model to follow. He had not gained his wealth by dishonest or corrupt means. He had worked for it, poured his money back into the business, and had done well. He was financially secure. He could now enjoy the good life: good food, fine wine, servants, and whatever pleasures money could afford. Isn't that what we all aim for in life? Isn't that why we go to college, so that we can get a good career, make plenty of money, provide the finer things in life for our children, and retire some day with plenty in our investments? What's wrong with that?

William Barclay (*The Gospel of Luke* [Westminster Press], p. 164) points out that this man's "whole attitude was the very reverse of Christianity. Instead of denying himself he aggressively affirmed himself; instead of finding his happiness in giving he tried to conserve it by keeping." His goal was to enjoy life, but in seeking his life, he lost it. What was wrong was the man's focus. He had the world's perspective, not God's perspective.

God's perspective is not that riches are inherently wrong. Money can be a great good if it is used in line with God's perspective. There are several wealthy men in the Bible, such as Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph who enjoyed God's blessing and were godly men. But, to a man, they were generous men who lived in light of eternity. As Paul tells Timothy,

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

So if we want to be rich toward God, we need to be careful to distinguish between the world's perspective and God's perspective. We are bombarded daily with the world's perspective, which invariably is focused on this life. God's perspective always takes into account the life to come.

3. To invest your life successfully, deposit it with Jesus Christ and spend it for His kingdom.

You deposit your life and all that you have into the Bank of Heaven. As you withdraw from the account, you consider God's purpose through His Son, to be glorified in all the earth when every knee shall bow before Jesus. In other words, you "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33).

This investment begins by depositing your life with Jesus Christ, which means, entrusting your eternal destiny to Him. All of the good works that you try to do for God will not begin to pay the debt of your sin when you stand before Him. Jesus Christ paid that debt. On the cross, He cried out, "It is finished" (John 19:30). The Greek word means, "paid in full." The wages of sin is death, and Jesus paid that price for you if you will put your trust in Him. When you stand before God and He asks, "What is in your account in the Bank of Heaven?" the only answer that will suffice is, "The blood of Your Son Jesus has paid for all my sins."

Every investment requires trust, including the depositing of your life with Jesus Christ. When you put your money into the bank, you trust the officers and personnel of that bank to keep it safe for you. You may say, "Yes, but my money is insured by the Federal government." So, you trust an institution that is trillions of dollars in debt and is run by the likes of Bill Clinton? If you can trust the U.S. government with your money, surely you can trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior!

Then, to be rich with God, you must expend what God has given you in line with His kingdom purposes. If you had come into a lot of money that you planned to invest, presumably you would take some time, thought, and effort to invest it wisely. You may even pay a financial counselor to give you some insights on where to put that money. Yet, while most of us are quite careful about investing money for our own purposes, we're pretty sloppy

when it comes to investing in light of God's kingdom purposes. But, as the parable of the talents shows, we need to invest what God has entrusted to us in such a way that it will bring a good return in light of His purpose of being glorified among the nations.

Does this mean that we can't spend any money on ourselves? Does it mean that we should live at a poverty level, drive old cars, only buy used clothes, and never spend money for personal enjoyment or pleasure? I doubt if many are tempted to go to those extremes, but, no, that's not what it means. God has blessed us with many things and it is legitimate to enjoy those blessings with thankful hearts. Also, it is prudent and in line with Scripture to provide in a reasonable manner for our future needs through saving and investing (Prov. 6:6-11).

But, at the same time I think that most Christians need to think much more carefully about the question, "Am I really seeking *first* God's kingdom?" Am I constantly thinking of the stewardship of my life and money in light of what God is doing? Or, could the deceitfulness of riches be getting a subtle stronghold on my life?

We expect missionaries to live modestly. We would be bothered if we heard that a missionary we were supporting was getting rich. And, yet, we aren't bothered if *we* get rich and live lavishly. Missions strategist Ralph Winter argues that *all* Christians should live a missionary lifestyle and give the rest to the Lord's work. We all should be as committed to the Great Commission as missionaries are, even if God has not called us to go to another culture. After all, Jesus didn't say, "All you missionaries should seek first God's kingdom, but the rest of you can just give a tenth, spend the rest on yourselves, and live as you please." Probably, most of us need to give more serious time, thought, and effort to the matter of our stewardship in light of God's kingdom priority.

Conclusion

To be *really* rich, Jesus says that we must be rich toward God by laying up treasure in heaven. Paul says that we do that when we are rich in good works, generous, and ready to share. We should think of ourselves standing before God, giving an account of what He has entrusted to us. Will we be *really* rich on that day?

At the end of the movie, "Schindler's List," the war is over and Mr. Schindler is leaving the many Jews whom he saved by employing them in his munitions factory. He has spent his entire personal fortune to bribe German officials in order to save these people from the death chambers. But as he looks at them, he breaks down weeping and laments, "I could have done more." They try to console him, but he points to his nice car and says, "I could have sold it and save a few more lives." He pulls out an expensive fountain pen and a watch and says, "These could have been sold to save another life."

Schindler was not a Christian and he was not saving souls for eternity. Perhaps the man was a bit too compulsive about his mission. But, still, when we think of our Savior's commission, to preach the gospel to every creature, we all need to ask ourselves, "Am I doing enough?" Am I laying up treasure for myself, or am I getting *really* rich, rich toward God, by laying up treasures in heaven?

Discussion Questions

1. Is it wrong to seek to improve my financial condition? What about wanting to get rich? Give biblical support.
2. How much is enough? At what point do we violate Jesus' point about not laying up treasure for ourselves?
3. How can we be on guard against all greed? Is all luxury wrong? How do we define luxury in light of the world's poor?
4. Are things like insurance and investments opposed to trusting in God and seeking first His kingdom? Give biblical support.

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