

Sermon 8/4/2019

A sixth-grade teacher posed the following problem to one of her arithmetic classes: "A wealthy man dies and leaves ten million dollars. One-fifth is to go to his wife, one-fifth is to go to his son, one-sixth to his nephew, and the rest to charity. Now, what does each get?"

After a very long silence in the classroom, one little fellow raised his hand. With complete sincerity in his voice, he answered, "A lawyer."

He's probably right. Most of us are quite somber when it comes to money. It is estimated that 40% of the marriages that fail are the result of conflict over finances. Colleges report that students today are forsaking the study of Liberal Arts for courses in accounting, engineering, and business. Newspapers are devoting entire sections to the subject of money. People who just a few years ago were financially illiterate are now following with interest—no pun intended—rates on Certificates of Deposit, Money Market accounts, *etc.* Young couples are being urged to sit down with a financial planner early in their marriage and map out a strategy for achieving their financial goals. Of course, some persons are concerned about money almost to the point of desperation. All of us are concerned, for one reason or another, about money.

Jesus knew that. It was no different 2,000 years ago. That's why he had so much to say on the subject. Money is an important part of our lives. Indeed, Jesus frequently noted that we will control our money or it will control us. It will either be a blessing to us or a curse.

Our lesson for today begins with someone in the crowd saying to Jesus, "*Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.*" That's interesting, don't you think? Instead of going to a lawyer he went to Jesus for advice. Jesus replied, "*...who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?*" 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.*"

And then he told a story about a rich man whose land brought forth so bountifully that he didn't know what to do with the surplus. "*I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones.... 'And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink, be merry.'*" Most of us would like to have a problem like that, now wouldn't we?

While we are gladly building those bigger barns, what is really happening? Let's look to the story told by Jesus. "*The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest.*" It looks as if he had the advantages of the rich, owing the best quality land, maybe able to employ the best farming practices, and also having the good luck of a few bumper seasons. I suspect that like every well-to-do person I have ever met, he assumed that every gram of his success was well deserved—that his special character, or skill, or hard work, or even his righteous prayers, were being justly rewarded. There is no thought of luck, and no thought of what some of us call providence. It's a case of "I'm a good person and I deserve it." Notice that there is no suggestion of impropriety. Jesus does not even hint at anything wrong with his code of practice. You know the conclusion to the story. That very night God came to him and called him a "fool." Why? "*This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*" Then Jesus adds, "*So is he [a fool] who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.*"

Isn't it interesting that God should call him a fool— not a sinner, not a reprobate— but a *fool*? The only thing wrong with this rich farmer was that he was stupid. With all his property and all his big plans, he missed the real point of life. He lost the plot. He threw all his energies into physical prosperity and planned for future physical self indulgences. He never did stop to ask: "Is this all there is to life?" And so he died a *spiritual* pauper.

Imagine his funeral. A large send off I am sure, because people who build "big barns" (of one sort or another!) usually get a big "send off". What was his eulogy about? Success and big barns, I suppose. Afterwards, would the mourners swap stories about his big barns? Would they say to his widow, "He'll be greatly missed. He set a standard in big barns that this district will always remember". And the epitaph: "He built the biggest barns. Sorely missed by all." I wonder how his children felt? Had he been a good father or was he so busy building barns that he gave them scant attention? Did they ever really know him? Maybe he gave them lavish pocket money, but how much love? And what about his wife? Did she feature in his allocation of time and energy? Was her advice ever sought? How does a marriage go when one partner is enthralled only with building bigger barns?

The fact is that he was stupid. He missed the whole point of life. He left unexplored the personal-spiritual dimension, the better business of loving God

and loving others. He had ceased to be alert to the precious nature of life: the wonder of the gift of each new day, the miracle of love, and the exceptional potential of his own presence among us. (By the way, I wonder whether his eldest son was encumbered with the expectation of having his late father's plans for bigger barns brought to fruition? If so, what a grim prospect.)

The most surprising thing about people like this, is that they have little they can call their own. There is nothing left when death stripped them down to the essential truth. Our mortality shows what is really ours, what we are really worth. And this worth is not measured in big barns, big power, big popularity, big influence, big status. God's currency is love, love, and more love. Love cannot be devalued either in life or death— it is eternal! The fool in this parable had nothing of any value to take with him or to leave behind at the hour of death; a fool's life ends with total emptiness.

The rich man was foolish because he did not take into consideration his accountability to God. This seems to be the point that Jesus was making with this parable. Consider his concluding remarks: "*So is he [a fool] who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.*"

Many people today are what I would call "functional atheists." That is, they may believe in the existence of God, but it makes no real difference in the way they live their lives. They have no sense of their own personal accountability. So, what does it mean to be "*rich toward God?*" We Protestants are in a bind at this point. We believe that salvation is only by grace—God's doing us an inexplicable favor—and not by works—the hard and fast things we leave behind. Yet the scriptures are very clear— One day we will stand before God and give an accounting of how we used all our resources, including our financial resources.

That shouldn't surprise us: doesn't it make sense that God who granted us the great gift of life, who gave us talents, abilities and opportunities should hold us accountable for the use to which we put them? Wouldn't it be "foolish" to assume otherwise?

God called the rich man a fool. Maybe he paid too high a price for his wealth. Perhaps he put off living until it was too late. It could be that this *poor* rich man never understood that money can never bring us joy until we use it to show love for another. Or it may be that he simply never realized that ultimately he was accountable for everything in his life— including how he used his money. Could

you and I possibly be making the same mistakes? Perhaps it is not so much a matter of being sinful. Perhaps we are just being foolish.