

Luke 12:13-21 (1984 NIV)
How to Overcome Greed

Introduction

“He’s got the Midas touch.” We say this of people who seem to be good at making money. The story of King Midas comes to us from ancient Greek mythology. King Midas once found Silenus, the tutor of the god Bacchus, and showed the lost Silenus the way back to his pupil. Excited at the return of Silenus, Bacchus promised Midas any reward he wished. Midas asked that everything he touched might be changed to gold. Bacchus immediately granted his wish and Midas returned to his palace with his new-found talent. True to Bacchus’ promise, everything Midas touched turned to gold. Midas could take a stick and with a touch turn it into a stick of gold. He could take a mud brick and with a touch turn it into a brick of gold.

Elated at his new talent, Midas had his servants prepare a sumptuous feast. The choice dishes were placed before him. But the moment Midas touched anything, it turned to gold. The cloth, the plates, the cups, the food—these all turned to gold as soon as they came into contact with his fingers or his lips.

In the end, Midas discovered that all the gold could not satisfy his most basic need—food. Desperately hungry, he returned to Bacchus and begged him to remove the gift, which Bacchus did.

Indeed, the Midas touch may not be the blessing we often assume it to be.

(<https://storiesforpreaching.com.au/sermonillustrations/greed/the-midas-touch>)

Our text today deals with an occasion when Jesus was teaching a crowd, including His disciples. A man in the crowd had a problem with his brother concerning the division of the family’s inheritance. This man wanted Jesus to be the arbiter. Jesus took the opportunity to teach a lesson on being rich towards God by telling a parable.

Notice that the rich man in the parable was not faulted because he was dishonest or wicked. He was faulted because he was a fool. He was foolish because he made some unwise assumptions. He was foolish not because he was stupid, but he was lacking understanding from God’s perspective about the basis of a “good life”.

This parable is not about the virtue of material renunciation, but about the foolishness of an existence that can be so full materially, yet so empty spiritually.

The parable points out one wrong preoccupation of the rich man, and that is ...

I. He enthrones himself as the centre of his existence (vv. 16-18).

This man is not a fool because he is rich and prosperous. There is no special holiness that accompanies being poor. In fact, Solomon was a very rich king ruling Israel when the nation was in her golden era. Joseph was very successful in terms of power and possessions during his years as the no. 2 man in Egypt. These men were greatly used by God in their time. They were powerful and prosperous, and they were no fools. Instead, they were blessed with much wisdom from God.

This rich man in the parable asks a very good question in v. 17 in view of his abundance, "What shall I do?" This is a very good, not foolish question. He then answers his own question in v. 18, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods."

This man plans for the future. Surely, he is not a fool for doing that. But the problem here is not with his planning, but with his storing. It reflects an attitude—i.e. in spite of his abundance, he is still not satisfied. He still wants to keep more and more. He doesn't know when to say, "Enough is enough."

Hence, he makes an inevitable response in v. 19—i.e. a self-indulgent tendency to "eat, drink and be merry". But surely, taking and making time to enjoy what you have worked hard for is not wrong, is it? Of course it is not. But the picture here is one who enthrones himself as the centre of his whole existence. Imagine, throughout his short self-conversation in vv. 17-19, he uses "I" six times and "my" (or "myself") five times.

So the man asks a very good question—"What shall I do?" But he gives a very poor answer to his own question. He laments that he has "no place to store my crops", not "no one to share my crops". He fails to see beyond himself. He is a fool because he thinks that he can be happy to no end if he keeps getting and storing without giving and sharing. For him, the good life is to enjoy what he has in gratifying self rather than to employ it to glorify God. He does not see the need to minister to the needy with what God has blessed him.

Human wisdom would consider this man a balanced person. He is wise enough to work hard and enjoy hard. But Jesus calls him a fool because all his work and enjoyment are related to himself only and no one else.

When this man puts himself as the centre of his whole existence, he becomes an isolationist in two ways:

- First, he isolates others out of his life. Notice how he laments over the absence of bigger barns to store his crops. He is all bent to keep everything to himself. And if someone else is starving, it's not his business. Therefore, he yearns for barns to store more and more instead of people to share what he already has in abundance. He sees his problem as no barns to store his crops, but misses the prospect of having people to share his crops. This parable warns that when a man makes himself as the centre of his whole existence, he can be so full of himself yet so empty of meaningful relationships. The parable reminds us that our relationships are the real tests of our success. They are the bottom line. They are the real treasure. The absence of meaningful relationships in the life of the rich fool is evident—Jesus depicts him as a lonely figure who talks only to himself throughout the whole parable.
- Second, he isolates even God out of his life. Notice how secured the man feels in v. 19. He thinks he has “plenty of good things laid up for many years”. Thus, he reassures himself that things will be okay. “Take life easy. You’ve done well. Go ahead and enjoy,” he congratulates himself. He feels so much in control. Notice how loud he speaks of “my barns” and “my crops”. But notice how silent he talks of “my God”. Well, does this man believe in God? I believe he does because Jesus is using him to represent some people in His Jewish audience. And the Jews believe in Yahweh. But it seems that even if he believes in God, God does not seem to matter much to him. There seems to be no dependence on God. This man is very much a self-made man who doesn't see his need for God.

The rich man's preoccupation with getting, keeping, and enjoying all the material things he possesses is an indication that he loves himself above anyone else. He may not love his material possessions for their own sake, but he certainly treasures them because they are means which he can use to love himself.

Therefore, this man is a fool before God not simply because he loves material things, but because he loves himself to the point of self-worship. He sees himself as the ultimate person whom he should please and be accountable to. Therefore, others can go starving, and God can be brushed aside and left out in the cold.

The parable goes on to caution us by describing the result of this preoccupation, and that is ...

II. Self-worship makes us live for earthly time, but not for heavenly eternity (vv. 19-21).

It is apparent that the rich man is very hardworking. He is not a fool because he has worked hard. In fact, working hard is pleasing to God. It is not a curse as a result of the Fall of Adam and Eve as is the belief of some. Why? It is because God Himself is a working, creating God. He worked in creation. He worked in salvation history. He commissioned Adam to have dominion over and to care for the rest of creation in Eden—that's work for Adam even before he fell (Gen. 2:15).

The rich man is a hardworking person. He is not a fool for that, but for his arrogant boasting in v. 19. He said to himself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." He is all prepared for retirement, but tragically, not for eternity. He is all ready to live out his life for the good times in this world, but not for the sake of eternity.

Therefore, God has to break in with an indictment in v. 20, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

As this man engages in self-admiration, God has to intrude and say to him, "This very night your life will be demanded from you!" What a sudden and cruel turn of events. Not only is his life taken away from him, but also the things he treasures so much. The very things on which he bases his description of the "good life" have to be totally left behind. He cannot even take a tiny bit of these with him.

The man is made to realize (perhaps a little too late) that the "currency" in heaven is not the same as that in this world. He realizes that in spite of his riches here on earth, he has not been rich in faith, grace, and love. He realizes that what's important to God is not how much he has gathered in this life, but how well he has used these for God's glory here on earth.

How prepared are we to face God when our earthly time runs out on us? We take great pains to plan for our retirement from work. But how prepared are we for our retirement from this earthly life? It may be many years from now. It may be this very night!

When our earthly time runs out on us, we stand before God not with all our possessions and say, "These are all I've gathered while on earth." Instead, we stand before God in all our material nakedness to answer this question from Him—"How have you used your possessions to glorify my name?" How well do we use our earthly possessions so that we can convert them into heavenly "currency" in order to be rich towards God?

The rich fool lived only for earthly time, not for heavenly eternity. So, when his building project was over, his human project was finished too. The value of what he had lived for all his life ended there and then—with the barns he built on earth. Unfortunately, all these barns could not bring him any further and any higher into the heavenly realm no matter how big they were on earth.

Indeed, when we merely live our lives for earthly time, much of what we do in God's name seems a waste of time. But when we view all that we do for God as living for eternity, then what we share/give in God's name here on earth is really spiritual investment for eternity's sake.

Conclusion

Let me lay out three principles for application to guard against greed in our lives in light of what we have learnt from this parable:¹

- One, live with a grateful and contented heart. Prov. 30:8-9 says, “Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.” So, learn to be grateful to God by celebrating what He has already blessed us with and not complain about what we do not have. Instead of always wanting more and bigger barns, seek godly contentment so that we know when to say “enough is enough”. Ungrateful and discontented people often ask, “What can I afford to have more?” To cultivate a grateful and contented heart, we need to discipline ourselves to ask, “What can I afford NOT to have more?”
- Two, live with a giving and compassionate heart. 1 Tim. 6:18-19 says, “Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” May our material possessions not cause us to see only our right to keep all that we have to our ourselves. We are blessed by God so that we can bless others. Our responsibility as people blessed by God is not to renounce material possessions as if these are “dirty”. Rather, our responsibility is to release material possessions, and be channels of God's grace and goodness to others who are having less. This is what the Lord means when He calls us to build up treasures in heaven with our earthly wealth. The Lord calls us to give our God-given and God-entrusted resources back to His Gospel work here on earth.

¹ I would simply define “greed” as “a selfish and excessive desire for more of something than is needed (e.g. money, power, food, and other material things).”

- Three, live with a heart that loves relationships with God and people above things. Matt. 22:37-39 says, “Jesus said: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” God has created us with both body and spirit. The actions of animals are all directed at preserving the survival and well-being of the physical. For us, life is not only physical well-being, but also spiritual well-being—i.e. to be rich towards God and people in faith, grace, and love. Otherwise, we behave no better than the animals by loving things and hurting people for our own preservation and survival in a so-called “dog-eat-dog” world.

God impressed upon me these three principles very early in my ministry journey. Allow me to humbly share a personal testimony here.

When I was first in seminary to prepare for Christian vocational ministry, I received some financial help from my church. In human terms and in comparison to what I had been getting when I was in the workplace, the amount looked very small. But I believed my church (a small congregation) had, in a gesture like this, supported me as reasonably as they were able. And for this, I was very thankful. I learnt to live with a grateful and contented heart.

But just when I thought I had mastered the art of living simply, God handed me a test. I became friend to an African man. He was married to a local lady and was also preparing for Christian vocational ministry, but in another seminary. One time, he had difficulty meeting his basic needs. On learning his predicament, I felt led to commit myself to help him for six months. I learnt to live with a giving heart, even with the seemingly little I had.

It was fine with me initially. Two months later, I myself was faced with some unforeseen needs. Trying to live with what I was receiving, it seemed rather impossible because of my earlier commitment to this African brother. So I was tempted to ask him to seek help from someone else.

But as I was trying to determine how best to say this to him, the Lord dealt with my heart. And the Lord tested me with this heart question, “How much you can help this person is not so much your responsibility, but your response to my ability. Do you trust me to have enough for you AND for him?” I then felt challenged to stretch my faith for the remaining months by continuing to help this friend. The Lord challenged me to live with a heart that loves relationships above things, regardless of circumstances.

It was a good six months of trusting and experiencing the Lord's sufficiency towards his needs and my needs. I learnt to say, "When I count, what I have seems not enough. But when I trust, God is always enough."

The parable of the rich fool was told by Jesus when one man asked the Lord to tell his brother to give him his share of their father's inheritance. These two brothers had probably lost their father recently. But they were not wise. They were fools. They wasted the moment of grief that could bind them closer to each other. All they could think about at the death of their father was not sharing the grief, but splitting the inheritance. In their craving for material things they had lost the real treasure of love. They each might have gained an inheritance, but they had lost their soul.

In this parable, the rich man's foolishness is in his philosophy of life, not his possessions in life. He enthrones himself as the centre of his existence, cares only for himself, and does not share with others. Also, he lives only for earthly time and not for heavenly eternity. His bottom line is building barns for himself, and not building relationships with God and others.

Do you want to be wise or foolish before God today? The Christian martyr, Jim Elliot, said it well: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Let's seek God to grant us wisdom to give away on earth what we cannot keep so that we can gain in heaven what we cannot lose. Amen!