

## “Summer of Parables: The Rich Fool”

*Luke 12:13-21*

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Jesus is preaching his way to Jerusalem and to the cross. Thousands of people are coming out to listen to him. And suddenly this unnamed guy steps out of the crowd to interrupt Jesus, saying, “Tell my brother to give me a fair share of the family inheritance.” This guy is kind of like the student who falls asleep in class. And when he’s woken up with a question—his answer is totally unrelated to the discussion at hand. This guy’s comment has nothing at all to do with what Jesus has been speaking about. But it would seem that it’s a topic that this guy just can’t stop thinking about—that he has been ripped off of his inheritance by his brother.

Unfortunately, this issue of siblings being at odds with each other over a will or an estate is all too common. Such conflict can permanently destroy sibling relationships. A good lesson to us on the importance of having a good will that spells out an equitable division of resources.

Jesus is invited to intervene in this tricky family situation. But Jesus won’t take the bait; instead Jesus has discerned something deeper at work in this man’s heart. And Jesus responds with a statement that he shares with all of the thousands who are listening: “Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12:15)

This is one of those verses that needs be committed to memory—just like the Greatest Commandment (to love God and love neighbour) and the Golden Rule (to do unto others as you would have them do unto you). The culture around us is telling us all the time that one’s life **does** consist in the abundance of possessions. Our culture is continually planting this seed of greed in us that is like a tiny parasite. It tells us that if we can just have one more thing (this bigger house, this better car, these nicer clothes or whatever it is) then we will finally be happy. And that you need more to be genuinely happy. The greed virus is in our bloodstream and part of the human condition. And as Eugene Peterson says, “Sometimes there are enough Scripture (or Faith) antibodies to protect us against infection. But there are other times when our defences are lowered and our whole system is fatigued. We get the fever and runny nose of greed. And it isn’t long before we’re thinking about building a bigger barn. Jesus tells a story that blows the smoke away, exposing the greed underneath—reminding us that our life does **NOT** consist in the abundance of our possessions.

Today we are continuing with our Summer of Parables Series. Over these couple of months we are looking at 15 of the 42 parables of Jesus that are recorded in the Gospels. In today’s Parable of the Barn Building Rich Fool there is no thief, no indication of mistreatment of workers, no criminal acts; only a successful farmer who decides to build new and bigger barns. Sun, soil and rain join to make this man wealthy.

He is careful and conservative. And in his prosperity he decides to tear down his old barns and build new and bigger barns.

“So what’s the big issue?” You are asking. It sounds completely normal to us. It’s the kind of farmer we’d read about in the news and who’d receive the award for “business person of the year.” So what is Jesus’ big problem?

The parable calls this barn builder a fool. Why is that? Look closer. Jesus does not condemn the guy for being rich. Nor does he condemn him for having a bumper crop that year. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism used to say: “make all you can, save all you can—and also **GIVE** all you can.” It’s this last part this is missing in this farmer.

Did you notice that it’s **ALL** about him!—no one else is mentioned in connection with him—no family, no friends, no workers? Let me read these two verses again—while on one hand you count the number of times you here “I” and on the other hand the number of times you hear “my.” “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. <sup>17</sup> And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ <sup>18</sup> Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup> And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ How many “I’s” did you count? Six? And how many “y’s”? Five? In three verses this guy speaks about himself 11 times. He lives **completely** for himself. He congratulates himself. He is interested only in his personal gain. At no point is the welfare of others mentioned.

This is greed on full display. And God won’t stand for it. “Fool,” says God, “Tonight you die. And your barn full of goods—who gets it?” *And then comes the great line in the Message:* “That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.”

New York City Presbyterian Pastor, Tim Keller, was leading a series of sermons on the seven deadly sins. His wife asked him if the talks were each being advertised. “Yes,” he replied. “Well wait and see,” she said, “on the day you do “greed” watch the attendance drop.” And sure enough, she was right. It was the lowest attendance of the whole series. Why? It wasn’t that people didn’t want to hear about greed—they just didn’t think it applied to them.

When greed infects us we quit thinking of wealth as abundance to be shared—and make it instead a power to be managed and controlled. We are in charge. We don’t need others. We aim to be independently secure—in control. But building barns doesn’t leave much energy left over for the time-consuming work of loving our neighbour—let alone loving our God. We use our position or goods as a means for getting more, instead of giving away love. And just after this, Jesus links concern about money to growing anxiety and worry.

Unfortunately, bigger barn building continues to be a growth industry among us promoted by consumerism’s perpetual dissatisfaction with what we have and who we are—on the way to getting what’s bigger and better. And God says that we are fools!

The story tells us that “the **land** of a rich man produced abundantly.” The rich man didn’t make the rain or the sun. Our Creator is generous. We are given what we need, but also much more. We are given not just one or two kinds of flowers or trees but hundreds and hundreds; not just one mountain peak, but hundreds and hundreds—each with different contours and colours. A spring gushes forth not just a little water, but gallons and gallons. We are given not just a few stars but millions and millions. This is the generosity of our amazing God. Scripture says that we are blessed to be a blessing—this is the rhythm of God’s Word to us. What are we doing to bless others—and not just think of ourselves? What could nourish us to worry less and bless others more?

Meister Eckhart wrote: If the only prayer I ever prayed was thank you—that would have been enough.” Gratitude and thanksgiving truly hold the key to a new kind of being. In gratitude the vicious cycle of entitlement is broken and we begin to recognize again what we have, rather than what we don’t; who we are instead of what we aren’t. Gratitude and thankfulness is the foundation of faith in God as the Creator of all beginnings. As Canadian Catholic, Mary- Jo Leddy says: (Gratitude) awakens the imagination to another way of being, to another kind of economy—the great economy of grace in which each person is of infinite value and worth. As the ripples of gratitude expand we come alive—as individuals, and as a congregation and community of faith as well; when we see the amazing things we have been given, instead of focusing on what we don’t have.

We worship because we hardly know how to say thanks for the most important realities in our lives—which are completely unearned, beyond our control and given to us for free. We worship because we have a sense of being blessed and when we worship our sense of being blessed deepens. When we realize how much we have been given—a life, a beginning, complete forgiveness through Christ’s cross, we now move, almost naturally to what to give away some of our things, our time, our talents, our wisdom—and eventually like Jesus we want to break open our whole life for the good of others. And a given life is just so very different from a driven life. In the process we become happier, more whole and healed people. In giving away, the ingratitude and the need for more begins to lose its grip on us. And we begin to discover the life that’s really life.