

Be on your Guard Against Greed – Luke 12:13-21, Pentecost 11, 8/25/19

At just 22 years old, a young man named Alexander set sail with a small army to invade Persia, the largest empire in the world. Even though he was outnumbered in almost every battle, Alexander was on the brink of conquering all of Persia within 3 years. In the final battle, 35,000 Greeks lined up against 200,000 Persians. Almost immediately Alexander shattered the Persian line. Their king fled. Sources say Alexander lost about 100 men. Alexander was ruler of Persia before he was 25. At just 31 years old he controlled Greece, Persia, Egypt and much of India. He never lost a single battle. He founded 20 cities, all named after him. Is it any wonder they call him Alexander the Great? At the height of his power, no man rivaled him in power, wealth, or military genius. And at the height of his power, at age 31, he got sick and died. Over the next 50 years, Alexander's infant son was murdered and his own generals ripped his empire apart in a civil war.

Nothing in this world lasts. Time and time again, throughout history, someone amasses land and wealth only to have it crumble away at death. And yet the temporary things of this world have such a hold on us. Possessions and money make promises they can never keep. Security. Happiness. Yet in a moment it can disappear. Is it any wonder Jesus spoke so frequently about money? 1/4th of all his parables were about the proper use of possessions. Today Jesus tells us, be on your guard against greed. Be rich toward God and be rich toward others.

Have you ever been in a big crowd? I mean a big crowd. Like Disney world or state fair. People are bumping into each other. Everyone doing that slow shuffle to try to get anywhere. Put yourself in a crowd like that. Thousands of people all of them pressing in trying to hear, trying to see Jesus. You've been there all day, waiting for your chance. Finally, you see an opportunity. You break through a gap. Everything stops. All eyes are on you. Jesus looks at you. You can ask him anything you want. Anything in the world. So you ask him about the thing that's been gnawing at you for weeks. The one issue that keeps sleepless late into the night.

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus looks at you. You think you catch a glimpse of something on his face. Not quite disappointment, sadness maybe? Jesus explains, "Look, I didn't come to settle disputes and make you rich. I have a much greater purpose in being here." Jesus knows how this money issue has been weighing on your heart. You think if you just get this settled then you'll be set. Then you can focus on the things that really matter. Then you can be happy. But Jesus knows that's not how it works. So he takes this opportunity to teach not only you but the whole crowd.

Filled with concern Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. And here's why.

"The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. So he said to himself, 'What can I do? My barn isn't big enough for this harvest.' 'I know,' he thought, 'I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grains and my goods and say to myself, Self, you've got it made, take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry.'

“But God said, ‘Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?’” And Jesus concluded, “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

What did this rich man do to deserve to be called a fool? He actually sounds wise, doesn't he? He doesn't blow his whole harvest on a new Ferrari, instead, he invests it back into his business and his retirement. Would any wealth management advisor have told him to do something else? Since when is it a crime to be rich? Since when is it a sin to save?

Take a look again at what he said to himself. Or rather what he doesn't say. He's already rich. God grants him a gift of even more goods. There's not one mention of God. Not one mention of his family, friends, or the poor. What he does mention a lot is, “*My barns, my grains, my goods, myself.*”

What made this man a fool was that at his deepest level, at his very soul, he wanted these riches for himself. He wanted them for his enjoyment. For his security. So he invested all these riches in himself. What made this man a fool is that he didn't realize how insecure that investment was. He didn't realize his very life was a gift that could be taken away at any moment. He invested everything in himself, in this life. When he died, he lost everything.

Again, it's not wrong to have money and possessions. These things are gifts of God gives us to bless us. The problem is we struggle with an improper attitude toward possessions.

A little boy rips through the wrapping on his last birthday present. It's the new battery-operated Rival Nemesis MXVII-10K Nerf gun (I had to look that up). This is the toy he's been begging for for weeks and he's ecstatic. He immediately runs out to the yard to set up some targets. He and that nerf gun are inseparable. When his little brother asks for a turn, he ignores him. When his mom asks him for help setting the table. He ignores her. What made that nerf gun a problem wasn't that he received it as a gift. What made it a problem was when the boy started loving that nerf gun more than his brother and mother. When instead of showing gratitude he used it for his own gratification.

Here's the crazy part. In a few weeks that toy is going to break. Or he'll get tired of it, and he'll move on, and he'll want something else. That attitude never goes away. It just matures as we do. A desire for better and different things. We think that money and goods are what is going to make us happy. They seem like a pretty safe goal. Really, it's irrational. Our toys break. Our beauty fades and all the jewelry in the world can do nothing about it. Our health wavers to the point we can't drive our brand new car. The stock market crashes and our savings evaporate. And if nothing else—even if none of that happens to us—we die.

Jesus' job was not to judge that man's inheritance issues. But Jesus is going to return and then he will come to judge. I can tell you two things for certain. Whether we die or Jesus returns before then, we will stand before him. You won't bring any of your possessions with you. What will be your relationship with God at that time? A child standing before his loving Father or a convict awaiting sentencing?

On our own, we would face an angry judge. But we're not on our own. When Jesus came to earth that first time, it wasn't to judge. Jesus gave up all the riches of heaven to set us free

from the clutches of greed. He who was rich became poor to make us who were spiritually poor rich. He took our sin of greed. Our attitude of holding onto the useless things of this life and exchanged them for treasure in heaven.

This is why Jesus cares so much about our possessions. Because if we hold onto them too tightly, we risk losing the treasure he won for us. We risk losing heaven. So he pleads with us, “Be rich toward God.”

What does it mean to be rich toward God? It means, believe that God is the giver of all things, of our very life and of salvation. When we invest our money, we try to make wise decisions. We look at how much risk is involved and how much return we might get for our investment. A savings account might be very safe, but you won't get lots of money back. Stocks might make you lots of money, but there's a chance you'll lose money too. What if you could make an investment that was guaranteed to more than quadruple your money? Who would say no to that? Invest your life in God. Trust in him for salvation. Look to him for satisfaction. He guarantees a reward in heaven that will last forever.

Jesus pleads with us to be on our guard against greed. He wants us to be rich toward God so we don't lose the heavenly treasure he's given us. We know what it means to be rich toward God. Let's look at what it looks like.

What would Jesus' parable have sounded like if that rich man had been rich toward God? Maybe something like this... A rich man's field produced a bountiful harvest. So he prayed to God and said, “Lord, you have given me many blessings. In thanksgiving, I'm going to give you 1/10th of my harvest.” Then he remembered his neighbor across the street whose kid was in the hospital and was having trouble paying the electric bill. So he bought him some groceries. And then he gave some money to a respected charity. And then he said to himself, “I have no room for all my goods. I know, I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones, then I'll be able to even better serve God and my neighbor.” Being rich toward God looks the same as being rich toward others. In fact, that's how we show we are rich toward God.

Well, that's a great example for a rich man who had so much money he didn't even have a place to put it. What about us who have bills to pay and mouths to feed. Who are on a fixed income or are paying off loans? Who only have as much money as our parents give us in allowance? This kind of generosity can only come from God. It comes from remembering everything we have has been freely given to us. So we can freely give to others. Even more so it comes from remembering the unimaginable riches of heaven belong to us. With that in mind, we are free to serve. I don't need anything. There's no reason for selfishness, it's totally irrational--greed is totally irrational. I've already got everything.

Set your heart not on the gift but the giver. What makes an engagement ring valuable? Is it the 2-carat diamond set in 18k platinum encrusted with smaller diamonds? Or is it the love of the one who gave the ring? Does the woman give all her love and devotion to the engagement ring or to her fiancé? God has given us something far more valuable than an expensive ring. So set your heart on God, not on his gifts.

Be on your guard against greed. Jesus doesn't want anything to come between him and us. So don't use your possessions for yourself. Don't go to them for satisfaction. Go to God. Be rich toward God. Use your possessions in his service. Be rich toward others.