

“Rich Toward God” GPPC 10-8-17  
Psalm 82, Luke 12:13-21

So this guy in the crowd decides to tattle to Jesus about his brother. Tattling to Jesus about somebody else never goes well.

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Apparently the two brothers’ father has died, and this man has the right to ask for his share of the inheritance. But Jesus refuses to get put in the middle. He says, “Friend, who set me up to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

Jesus sees something deeper than the surface request, something lurking in the man’s heart. So he uses the occasion as a teaching moment as he turns to speak not just to the man but to the whole group gathered before him and to us. He says, “Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed, because your life does not consist of accumulating possessions.”

Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? Jesus does not know about modern-day people. He doesn’t know our sayings. “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” He doesn’t know that. “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.”

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Jesus has probably never watched the 1987 movie “Wall Street,” with that slick inside trader and corporate takeover master, Gordon Gekko. He proclaims the gospel of Wall Street, “Greed is good.”

Greed is good. Jesus must have missed that class at Messiah school.

Bet he also hasn't seen the 2015 movie “The Big Short” that tells about the mortgage and housing crisis of 2008 when millions of people lost their jobs and their homes because of greed. And a character in the movie says, “I have a feeling, in a few years people are going to be doing what they always do when the economy tanks. They will be blaming immigrants and poor people.” Surely Jesus doesn't know that.

And Jesus probably doesn't understand about our insatiable desire for the biggest and best of everything—house, car, vacation.

Or maybe he *does* understand. Maybe he does.

He tells a parable. “A rich man's land produced abundantly. So he began thinking to himself.” Now count how many times the man refers to *himself* as he thinks. “What should I (1) do, because I (2) have no place to store my (3) crops? I (4) will do this: I (5) will pull down my (6) barns

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and build larger ones, and there I (7) will store all my (8) grain and my (9) goods. And I (10) will say to my (11) soul (12), ‘Soul (13), you (14) have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

In just three sentences the rich man refers to *himself* fourteen times. Fourteen. As the country artist Toby Keith sang, “I wanna talk about me. Wanna talk about I. Wanna talk about number one, oh my, me my.”

But how many times does the rich man refer to his family? Zero. His community? Zero. His faith community? Zero. God? Zero.

He is laser-focused on himself and how his ample goods will allow him to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” Or as it’s paraphrased in the Cotton Patch Gospels, “Recline, dine, wine, and shine!”

It sounds so attractive to us, like one unending party with *ourselves*, *our* wants, *our* pleasures, at the center of it all. And surely God *does* want us to enjoy our lives and to have fun. Surely that’s true.

And just as surely God wants us to live our lives not in anxiety, living hand to mouth, paycheck to paycheck, but instead planning and saving and preparing for the future, even a future when we will retire

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and do some relaxing, eating, drinking, and being merry. Surely this is true.

Yet in the parable God says to the rich man, “You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you’ve prepared, whose will they be?” As Jesus concludes, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

The problem lies not in our relaxing and having fun, or in planning and saving. No. The rich man is a fool, because he has misunderstood life and wasted his life. He has not understood or accepted that we do not *own* our lives. Our lives are merely *lent* to us for a short time by God. And God expects us to do something wonderful with the time, abilities, and money that entrusted to us for that short time.

As the rich man discovers, one day our lives here will end, and each of us will stand before God to give an accounting of how we’ve used the time, abilities, and money placed into our care. Were we grateful people? How did we respond to God with gratitude? How were we instruments of God’s love on the earth? Yes, God is gracious and

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loving, but nobody will escape that judgment. Nobody. It's a sobering thought, isn't it?

And oddly enough, it's also a good thing. It's a good thing, because it means our lives matter. Our choices matter. *We* matter.

We can be self-centered and selfish if we want to. Spend lavishly on ourselves and give little or nothing to God and God's church. Do little or nothing to serve others. Keep our God-given abilities for our own enjoyment. Support policies and leaders we know will hurt the weak, the poor, and hungry, and who fail to attempt any reasonable form of gun regulation and beefed up funding to help persons suffering from serious mental illness. We can do that. It's our choice. And we will live with the consequences. Damaged lives. Withered congregations.

Or we can be rich toward God, as so many in our congregation are. Giving generously back to God with their offerings. Worshiping God on Sundays and bringing their families to worship God. Learning and growing as Christians as we study the Bible and the great issues of our day and how we might respond. Taking our abilities and really putting

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them to use in the church and in the larger world. Growing as followers of Christ. Abundant lives. Vibrant churches.

We see people doing that around here, and there is so much joy in it, because this is the purpose of life—to be rich toward God with the grateful, big-hearted, open-handed stewardship of our lives. When people understand that life is a gift lent to us from God and they live in gratitude to God, their imperfect lives are filled with a sense of satisfaction that we call joy.

But as the parable reminds us, there is a terrible urgency about our choices. Too often people imagine, “Well, I’ll give generously to God through my church offering when I’m wealthier. I’ll worship God, when there isn’t something else fun to do on Sunday. I’ll learn about God in Christian education, when I’m retired. I’ll find a way to serve God with my God-given abilities when it doesn’t inconvenience me.” And what they’re doing is saying, “My selfishness is no big deal. There’s plenty of time.” And they’re saying to God, “I come first. My goods are laid up for me. I will return to you the scraps of my life.”

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This is tragic, but it need not be so. We have choices. As one scholar suggests, this week let each of us take a look at our checkbook (or online banking) and our calendar. What percentage of our money are we giving back to God through the church? We won't be legalistic about it, but the Bible suggests a tithe, 10%. What percentage are you and I giving? 10%? 5%? 1%? Less than that? Can we increase by 1% or more this year and work toward a tithe?

You'll notice I have said nothing about the church's budget, about the need to pay salaries, order curriculum, do mission, pay utilities and insurance, take care of the building, and so on. I've said nothing about the church's budget for two reasons. First, the budget is not the main issue. This is not a fund-raising speech for a non-profit organization. No. We're talking about the stewardship of our lives. Second, if all or most of our members give as they are able, we will easily have all the budget money we need not only to pay the bills but to expand our ministry for the glory of God. But it's really about the stewardship of our lives. The level of our financial giving should show our gratitude to God and

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require us to “live more simply so that others may simply live.” If that is not the case, then we are not giving enough.

So what percentage of our time and abilities are we giving back to God on a regular basis? If there’s no sacrifice on our part for God, then we are not being rich toward God. If our lives were demanded of us today, would we feel we’d truly shown our gratitude to God and been a part of God’s love in the world? Or would we feel we had lived foolishly?

This week let each of us take a look at our checkbook or online banking. Do we feel good about what we are giving back to God? And let’s each of us take a look at our calendars. Is God getting enough time from us in worship, Christian education, daily devotion, and service? If not, why not?

The choice is ours. God is the one who has created us, redeemed us from our sins, and sustains every moment. God has lent to us everything we have, life itself. Let’s not be foolish with our lives. Let’s be rich toward God. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal