

Parable Of The Rich Fool

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In Luke 12:13-21, a listener in the crowd surrounding Jesus asks Him to instruct his brother to divide the inheritance due to him equitably. Jesus declines, saying that life should not be based on having many possessions. He uses this occasion to teach His disciples that a godly life is more important than material things. To explain this, He tells a parable about a rich man who builds larger and larger barns to store all his crops and goods.

Since he had everything he could possibly want or need, the rich man's focus was on living an easy life. God's response is that the man was foolish because, when he died later that night, his goods would do nothing for him. Someone else would inherit and enjoy them. A person whose life is caught up in what he owns is not rich toward God. The Parable of the Rich Fool illustrates Jesus' teaching to guard against every kind of covetousness.

1. Who should judge civil matters? Luke 12:13-14; Deuteronomy 21:16-17; Hebrews 5:5.

Comment: The man in dispute with his brother thought he was being cheated. Perceiving that Jesus had influence with the people, he tried to get Him to side with him. Jesus' parable indicates that he probably did not have a just claim on the inheritance but was covetous. Had his claim been just, the laws of the land would have resolved it without Jesus' interference. Among Israelites, the firstborn received two shares—twice as much as any other child.

Jesus makes it clear that He had no responsibility to settle controversies of this type. He had not come to mediate secular disputes but to preach the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God, offering salvation to those who are willing to repent and live righteously. The nature and constitution of His Kingdom is spiritual, that is, not of this world. Secular authorities should judge civil affairs. Jesus could undoubtedly have judged this case justly, but He would have been interfering with the proper office of the magistrate.

2. What is wrong with desiring abundance? Luke 12:15; Exodus 20:17; Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:3-7; Hebrews 13:5.

Comment: One of the brothers, no doubt, was guilty of covetousness. Covetousness is an unlawful desire of the property of another; also a desire of gain or riches beyond what is necessary for our wants. It violates the tenth commandment and is expressly equated with idolatry. Jesus shows that we should not be anxious to accumulate wealth because, however much we may obtain, it will not prolong our lives. The man from the crowd was guilty of a desire for more than God in His providence and wisdom had allotted to him. His was a sinful desire of seeking more than his share.

3. What should be done with the excess of abundance God provides? Luke 12:16-17; Proverbs 11:25-26; 22:9; Isaiah 32:5, 8; Galatians 6:7-10.

Comment: Human nature tends to value the wrong things in life—to eat, drink, and be merry—things without eternal worth. Because of this temptation, people's main anxiety concerns accumulating this world's luxuries. The rich man may even have been embarrassed by his inability to store his hoarded wealth, but he never considered using his riches for the benefit of others. Irishman Jonathan Swift observed, "Nothing is so hard for those who abound in riches as to conceive how others can be in want." A generous person, however, sees the needs of others first. We should sow goodness and generosity so we will reap the same.

4. Why is the rich man a fool? Luke 12:18-20; 11:39-41; Jeremiah 17:11; James 4:13-17.

Comment: This sudden cutting short of the rich man's career expresses, not only the folly of assuming one knows what the future holds, but also of staking one's whole life on what may disappear at any moment. God calls this man a fool because he reasoned that his life of secure and abundant earthly enjoyment was the pinnacle of human success and happiness. A fool is a person without good sense or mental sanity, one who lacks a commonsense perception of the reality of physical and spiritual things. The true reality is that everything depends on what God wills, not what man plans.

5. What does Jesus mean by the phrase "not rich toward God"? Luke 12:21; Psalm 30:5; Proverbs 3:15; James 2:5; I Timothy 6:18; I Corinthians 10:31.

Comment: This phrase summarizes human folly and the error of thinking one does not need God. A person who "is not rich toward God" lives to accumulate and enjoy wealth only to die with nothing permanent or eternal to show for his efforts. Godly living—and all that God esteems to be true riches—is eternal. To think of life only in terms of physical things is both foolish and fatal because life is not comprised and enhanced even by abundant material possessions but by spiritual and eternal things. If we place God first rather than the accumulation of wealth, then we will use whatever He allows us to have, no matter how little or how much, to glorify Him.