

## RICH TOWARDS GOD

Genesis 1.1 – 2.3  
2 Corinthians 9. 6-15  
Luke 12. 16-30

I speak to you in the name of ☩ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

In today's passage from St Luke's gospel, we find our Lord in the middle of a long journey. The trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem takes only about three days to walk, but Luke spends nearly ten chapters getting Jesus and his disciples from point A to point B, as they travel to the place where Christ will ultimately die for the sins of the world.

This has not been a speedy trip, by any means. Our Lord has been stopping along the way to teach those who would listen about the Kingdom of God. Over and over again, throughout the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells parables to point out that the Kingdom of God is not what we humans might expect. The Kingdom of God flips our understanding of power upside down, and it flips our values right side up. In today's parable, Christ is about to challenge some commonly-accepted ideas concerning wealth and greed.

The misuse of wealth was actually a major topic of discussion in first-century Palestine, and almost every chapter of Luke's gospel has some reference to money and material resources. The tenth Commandment – 'Thou shalt not covet' – was familiar to all of our Lord's hearers. Greed is nothing more than a desire to have more than we actually have, and Jesus uses this 'teachable moment' to explain why greed has no place in the Kingdom of God.

So Christ tells a story, a story with a twist. We've heard it so often that it doesn't hold much surprise for us, but let me tell it again, to show you where the surprise came for these people who heard it for the very first time.

There was this rich farmer, who had a really good year. The ratio of sunshine to rain had been perfect, and the timing of the weather couldn't have been better. Without any more labour than he usually put into his farm, the land had produced a bumper crop; and the harvest was going to be great. In first-century Palestine, this would have been evidence of God's blessing on a good man. Good fortune meant that you'd been doing what you were supposed to do, and that God was smiling on you.

'What shall I do with all this good fortune?' the farmer asks himself. Wait a minute, the crowd is thinking. We know what a guy talking to himself means in story language, and it isn't good. People who talk to themselves are usually the bad guy in the story; but this must be a good guy, right? I mean, look at all these abundant crops? So the crowd leans in to listen to our Lord more closely, wondering which way the punch line is going to fall.

'I know!' says the farmer. 'I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, to store all my wealth! Then I can relax, eat, drink and be merry!' Some people in the crowd start to grumble. This doesn't make sense. You don't tear down your barns right before harvest! And why is he storing his wealth?...Unless he's planning to manipulate the corn futures. No, no, others argue. He's just being a good agri-businessman! He knows how to play the market! You're not listening, a third group chimes in. Apparently, he plans to hoard it all for himself!

Whilst the people hearing the story start to argue among themselves, Jesus delivers the punch line: 'You fool!' God says (and it is very unusual for God to be an actual character in the drama of one of these parables). 'This very night your life is required

of you. So now, who's going to get all that wealth you accumulated?' The crowd simmers down to think about this unexpected twist. Death hadn't been part of the picture until now. And if they were honest with themselves, God hadn't been part of the picture, either.

That's the point. That's why we call this story the 'Parable of the Rich Fool'. Christ wasn't saying that there is anything wrong with wealth. Rather, our Lord was saying: instead of foolishly focussing your efforts on getting rich for yourself, be rich towards God.

Several years ago, an article described some research done by the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. The article was entitled, 'Possessed by Money'; and it related the findings published by Dr Kathleen Vohs concerning the psychological effects of wealth. In her research which tested a wide range of people, Dr Vohs discovered that people with money on their minds are self-sufficient, self-focussed and anything but selfless. Vohs found that people who are reminded of money are really good at pursuing goals, but they are not kind or warm in interpersonal relationships. To the contrary, they tend to be standoffish and are not interested in being friends with anyone. Vohs describes these people as 'siloe'd' more than anti-social; and she is quick to say that we are not talking about wealthy people, necessarily, but about those who are pursuing wealth, people who think about money a lot. Some really wealthy people don't think about money very much at all, while some middle-class and very poor people think about money all the time. It's the thinking about money that creates the isolation described by Vohs in her work.

No wonder Jesus calls this rich farmer a fool! By focussing on his own accumulation of wealth and goods, he has isolated himself from others. Friends, this is not what the Kingdom of God is about. The Kingdom of God is about community, interconnectedness and living and working together for the glory of God.

So, how can we be rich towards God? What does that mean, exactly?

Being rich towards God means placing value on the same things that God values. It means loving the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength; and it means loving our neighbour as ourselves. It means loving mercy, acting justly and walking humbly with our God. It means enjoying a rich spiritual life that is nourished by prayer, Bible study, the Sacraments and fellowship with others as we seek to follow Jesus Christ and learn from him together. It means being honest with ourselves about our own hoarding of God's riches, and the talents and gifts he has given to each one of us to use for his glory. It means living lives of forgiveness, asking for it when we need it, and offering it when others need it. It means repenting of the sin of self-sufficiency and trusting that God will provide for all our needs if we will be rich towards him in the way we live our lives.

As we celebrate our Harvest Festival, as we offer up our worship and praise and thanks to God, may we strive to strive less. May we hope to hope more. May we love without reservation, be less concerned with ourselves and more dependent upon God to provide for us, to care for us and to be rich towards us in grace and mercy.

And may we be rich towards God. Amen.