July 24, 2016

Luke 12:13–21

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”
14 Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” 15 Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”
16 And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. 17 He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’
18 “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” ’
20 “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’
21 “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

Living the Rich Man’s Life Isn’t Easy

1. Examine the scenario

The crowd had all gathered around Jesus, and then there was a moment of silence. Perhaps you’ve seen it happen at the speeches of a politician. Someone thinks to themselves, “This is my moment to be heard!”, and out it goes. One woman cried, “Blessed is the woman who gave you birth!” Jesus said, “More blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” In this instance a man used the moment of silence to try and get justice for himself. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” I can’t help but think that his brother was in the crowd there too. Jewish law prescribed that the oldest son would receive a double portion. Maybe this guy thought he should receive the same amount. Or maybe his brother really did just deprive him of his rightful share.

Either way, Jesus was less than thrilled with the statement. He said, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” He wasn’t anointed by God and sent here to be a Judge Judy and make decisions about who would get what. Jesus came to take care of a bigger problem; to pay for the sins of the world; to suffer the curse of sin. He was sent be the Savior of the universe and to die for the sins of the world.

Yet Jesus used this as a teaching moment. “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” I’m not sure that this was a judgment on the man for wanting his share of the inheritance. Maybe it was against his brother for keeping all of the inheritance. Or maybe it was a judgment against worrying about the inheritance at all. After all, and inheritance is an inheritance. If you didn’t earn it in the first place, then why do you feel so entitled to it or why are you so worried about it? Sure, the inheritance may have made this man’s life a lot easier. But it wouldn’t get him to heaven. It wouldn’t make him look any better in God’s sight. It’s not like God is more attracted to rich people. He actually says that riches makes it more difficult for people to enter the kingdom of heaven.
Jesus used the moment as a wider declaration against any kind of greed. You can be greedy with your time. You don’t like it when someone calls you at home when you are trying to relax. You can be greedy with your finances. You bristle when you are told to give your firstfruits to church. You get angry when you are asked to give for another cause. You can be greedy with your stuff. You don’t like to borrow your stuff out or you don’t like it when people use your stuff.

The antidote to greed is to remember and believe that God has been and will always be generous with us. Jesus said that just as he fed the ravens and clothed the flowers of the field He would take care of us just fine, so we really don’t need to worry about how much we have to eat or drink. This is to overflow in the way we use what God has given us. He wants us to be generous and rich in good deeds. If someone wants to take your cloak, give him your tunic as well. You have nothing to worry about. The same God who gave you the cloak and the tunic can provide you with more. Greedy people don’t trust God to be God. They desire more than they need as a safety blanket for the future. They are seldom happy with what they have. They are driven by their wants and their fears rather than their actual needs. It’s this kind of mindset that is always making us say, “If I only had . . .”

We always say, “If I only had,” but what if God actually gave you a lifetime supply of stuff? Jesus provides the ultimate scenario. A man receives a bumper crop. He finally hits the mother load. You would think that if anyone would think about being generous - this guy would. If anyone would be happy, this guy would. Yet instead of being happy, he seems to be stressed over what to do to protect what he has. “What do I do with all of it? How do I protect it? How do I make it last for the rest of my life?”

This teaches us that even when we get what we want - even if we were to get the mother load, it wouldn’t necessarily make life easy and stress free. You finally start dating but then you immediately worry about how you can keep this person all to yourself. You finally get a job or a raise but then you still manage to spend more than you earn. Americans have tons more than most other nations. Yet we’re more stressed about our stuff than any of them. Superabundance doesn’t make life easy. “What do I do with it now that I have it?” That’s always the case.

2. What is his goal?

This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”

If you think about it, this man is really strange in some senses. He just wants to save what he has and enjoy it for the rest of his life. He didn’t want more. His mantra and his goal in life was pretty simple. Enjoy it! Live in the moment! This is even Biblical to a point! Remember the Ecclesiastes lesson? God’s Word says in chapter 2, “A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” It’s hard to find people that are actually happy with their jobs or their parents or their children. If you stopped reading the Bible right there you could say, “This must be what life is all about! The rich man had it right!”
There’s a popular mantra out there right now that says, “Live. Laugh. Love.” Another one says, “Life is too short.” It’s too short to be stressed; too short to be miserable. You need to enjoy the ride. It usually shows a picture of a woman on a beach reading a book. As with many things, there is some truth in this. But it is also a truth that is being miserably abused. Unfortunately this mantra is motivating unhappy married couples to say, “Why bother fighting? Why stay in a marriage when I’m not happy? I’m out of here.” It’s this mantra that seems to be motivating the Millennials to shun work because it isn’t very satisfying. I don’t like a job? I’ll just quit. Life’s too short.

Can you imagine the kind of hell we would have to face if Jesus had that attitude while on earth? Preach for countless hours? That’s too much work! Heal people incessantly? I don’t want to deal with these people all the time! Go to a cross and suffer and die? Life’s too short. Yes, His life was cut short - but for a reason - and a great one at that - in order to pay for our salvation.

This man’s goal to “eat, drink and be merry” was all about himself - how happy he was. He regarded the food as “my grain and my goods” instead of God’s gifts to him. People infected with this line of thinking say to themselves, “God wants me to be happy.” But they never stop to think what makes God happy. What kind of a parent would give a child a knife just to keep the child from crying and make him happy? Think of what makes the angels in heaven happy - when a sinner repents and turns to Christ for forgiveness. When a Christian is being driven by the Holy Spirit he will find his greatest joy in doing the will of Christ, even when doing the right thing hurts or involves painful and patient work.

Think of a little child that goes out to help plant a garden with the parent. It can be a hot day and it can be dirty work to plant the flowers and pull the weeds. But the child wants to be with the parent. The child wants the parent’s approval. She is willing to sweat and work just to be by her mom’s side. That is what brings her the greatest joy.

The man in the parable doesn’t want any of that. He just wants to sit under the umbrella and enjoy the fruit. He doesn’t care about anyone else’s need. He thinks that his crops were all for him to enjoy alone. He only wants what makes him happy. That is his version of joy. That is the devil’s goal. When live, laugh and love drives a spouse to selfish abandonment of the other in order to free himself from the responsibilities of being a husband and a father it is the most devilish happiness you can find. The first of nine Satanic statements is, “Satan represents indulgence instead of abstinence!” It also says, "I break away from all conventions that do not lead to my earthly happiness."

St. Francis of Assisi wrote a reflection of Jesus’ mindset in this prayer when he said,

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

3. What is the end?

The man who hit the mother load wanted to make sure that he had plenty stored up for the rest of his life. It reminds me of those who spend all of their efforts in making sure they have enough to retire on. They plan on
retiring at age 65 and then dying at perhaps age 80 or 90. So they make sure to faithfully invest in their retirement funds and do all they can to supply for 15 to 25 years of their life. Some have visions of grandeur of traveling across America and others just would be content to live at home and relax. This man wanted to make sure he had more than enough to live luxuriously for the rest of his life. But all he thought about was THIS life. How does twenty five years of life on earth compare to eternity?

The Greek literally says in vs. 19, “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many good things laid up for many years.’” It’s ironic that he is speaking to his SOUL, when all he is thinking about is his body. So the conclusion to this whole thing is that in all of his preparation he has forgotten that which is eternal and spiritual in regards to his soul. In his whole conversation he was only reasoning to himself. He never even brought God into the equation until God forced the situation through his death.

But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” Here he thought he was going to do this and that in retirement and he never imagined that with all of his wealth and riches that he wouldn’t get to enjoy one day with them. He never did enjoy them as he died that very night, and he couldn’t take one thing with him. All of the things he thought he would get to enjoy would be enjoyed by someone else, and he had absolutely no control over it. He foolishly overlooked all of that and he lost everything as a result. So God bluntly called him that. “You fool!”

Sometimes we need to see what sinful thinking is. It’s just plain foolish.

It’s interesting to note that Ecclesiastes mentions the same thing. It says, “I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.” I found it interesting that they focused on what happened to the stuff that was left behind. Isn’t it true that the parent who tries so hard to provide an inheritance for his children in the hope that it will give them security: how often does it end up bringing fighting and bickering and lawsuits instead? All of this stuff that you tried to preserve and you thought so priceless; a hundred years from now almost all of it will be long gone in the junk heap. One man told me his parents used to have furniture all covered in plastic to be perfectly preserved for the ages. As a child he could never sit on it or even enter the room. What good was that? The furniture became a source of tension between him and his parents. When you have what you want, how often does it ever give you the joy that you thought it would? But you never think of that while you revolve your life around your stuff.

Jesus came to this earth to provide a different inheritance, one that He could give to us and one that would last. He came to earn forgiveness for us and provide holiness for us; to give us protection from His own wrath on Judgment Day. He designed a way that He could shower this inheritance on us in our baptism and keep this blessing on us through faith. This inheritance has nothing to do with how rich or how poor you are or how strong or weak you are. It isn’t based on your worthiness. It is based on His worthiness. It is a gift of grace. This is what made Jesus happy; to be able to give us this gift. This is what drove Jesus to live in such misery, for the joy of knowing our sins would be paid for and heaven would be ours. He didn’t live for Himself. He lived for us. He wasn’t driven by what made Him materially happy (which made the devil’s temptation so foolish)! He was driven by what would make us eternally happy, even though it cost Him a life of sacrifice and
pain. He knew that our joy would be complete at the resurrection from the dead, not while we were living among the dead. This is the Savior we believe in.

It is His rich generosity that motivates us to live, laugh, and love the way HE wants us to. Everything that we have is a gift of God. We can enjoy it. We can share it. We can lose it. Whether we die rich or die poor, it doesn’t matter, because with Jesus and His mercy we are the richest people in the world. We are completely perfect in God’s sight because of Jesus. We are completely forgiven. We have food and clothing. We have a roof over our heads. We have an ETERNITY in heaven. We won’t need barns or bank accounts in heaven. We won’t need to worryedly follow the stock market prices. We won’t have to worry about medical bills or prescription drug prices. We don’t even need appreciative spouses or successful children to make us happy as long as we know that God is smiling on us. This is what makes us happy even when we’re miserable: it makes us rich when we are poor: because we know what the future holds. Are you being rich to God? Being rich to God is an active participle - it is a state of being. It isn’t just in what you give in an offering plate. It is who you are. “I am the richest man in the world in Christ.”

The man in the crowd was miffed because his brother didn’t share the inheritance with him. Instead of looking to Jesus for forgiveness He only turned to Him for money. He probably didn’t like what Jesus had to say, and He missed out on the greatest riches that Jesus had to offer. It often happens that when we go through problems we want Jesus to just fix the problems; to rid us of alcohol or pornography or a miserable marriage. We are angry about what we have lost and feel deprived. But if that’s all we are looking for we are no better than the man who wanted Jesus to fix his inheritance problem. Jesus said, “This isn’t what life is about. Don’t be so foolish and shortsighted.” Life is in looking to Jesus as your Lord and Savior. It is reflected in the attitude of faith and gratitude that we have over the things we have been given in life; which first and foremost includes forgiveness and salvation. When we have that straight, many times the rest of life falls into line. As long as we cherish Jesus and His forgiveness, we can live with whatever else life throws at us; our failures, our jobs, our children, our spouses, our homes, our successes, our sicknesses and our deaths. No matter how difficult life is, it can’t steal our true and inner joy of having Jesus. This is how we have a wisely rich man’s life. Amen.