

Bigger Barns or Deeper Discipleship?

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Zoar Lutheran Church

A couple stories about money: A young man once said to his girlfriend while looking out over a beautiful lake, Honey, I want you to know I love you more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I'm not wealthy. I don't have a yacht or a Maserati like Johnny Green, but I love you with all my heart.

She thought for a minute and replied, I love you with all my heart, too, but tell me more about Johnny Green.

A man finds an oil lamp on the beach....

We can chuckle at those stories, but money in our culture is serious business. We live in a capitalist, free-market, consumer-driven economy where sometimes people are judged by what they have or don't have. And we all have certain feelings about money and possessions that often stem from our families of origin. Maybe you were raised in a family that didn't have much, and you still feel anxious that there won't be enough. Maybe your situation has changed, and things are tighter financially. Maybe we have enough, but worry that something will happen. Maybe some of us feel a little guilty because compared to many in the world, we have a lot, and we wonder how to live responsibly with what we have.

Jesus talked a lot about money and possessions. Sixteen out of 38 parables are about money and possessions. Someone with more time on their hands than I figured out that there are 500 verses about prayer in the Bible, and 2,000 that have to do with money. Apparently the writers of scripture and Jesus knew that the worry about money and possessions can grab hold of us, and divert us from deeper concerns.

And Luke in particular talks about money and possessions, and especially the poor, more than any other gospel. And then he has these stories of rich people and what they do with their wealth, and that brings us to today's story from Luke 12. The set up is that somebody in the crowd wants Jesus to intervene in a family financial dispute. He claims that he hasn't gotten his fair share of the family inheritance.

We know from Deuteronomy that the oldest son received two-thirds of the estate, and the younger son one-third. Maybe this was the younger son, fighting for what was rightfully his. Maybe he had cared for his parents more than the older son, and he felt he deserved more. Luke doesn't give us the details.

Jesus says, I'm not getting involved in that dispute. I don't want to triangulate. You two work it out. But, Jesus says, since you brought up the subject, let me share some thoughts about possessions. By the way, psychologists talk about the presenting problem that can lead to a deeper issue. Maybe this was the presenting problem. And Jesus says, Let's take this deeper. He says, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Why take care? Because billions of dollars are spent each year to try to convince you and me that our identity is actually wrapped up in our possessions, that we are first and foremost consumers; that we might have more value because of the car we drive and the clothes we wear and the toys we own, that's kids' and adults' toys. Jesus says, Be on your guard. Life is more than the purchases you make for your family and yourself.

Teenagers listening, you are in the process of figuring out who you are, and that's what's supposed to happen. And there is so much pressure to look a certain way, to dress a certain way, to fit in, and I get that. We want to belong. But I just want you to know that your fundamental identity is loved child of God. There's nobody just like you, and if you decide not to be you, then there is going to be somebody missing in the world. You are fundamentally, irrevocably, unchangeably loved by the Creator of the universe. And yes, billions of dollars are spent every year to tell you how to fit in. But Jesus says, You're life doesn't consist in what you've got, or what you don't have for that matter.

So, Jesus being Jesus, he illustrates the point with a story. It starts out rather innocently. The land of a rich man produced abundantly. Notice, by the way, that the *land* produces. There is already a miracle going on. Don't you think seeds placed in the ground with the addition of water and sunshine growing into plants is a miracle? I certainly do.

So yes, the farmer benefits from this amazing cycle of nature that is just a gift. But I believe the way he sees it is, his hard work has paid off. We

assume he gained his profits honestly, he treated his workers fairly; the text doesn't say otherwise. Things had gone well for him, through a combination of hard work and good weather and the fruitfulness of the land. So far so good. Jesus doesn't criticize the man because he is wealthy, or because he has become even wealthier.

The problem begins to take shape with what happens next. The rich man has a conversation, but do you notice who he talks to? Himself! He only has a conversation with himself. He becomes the sole reference point for his life. Listen to this conversation: He thought to himself, what should I do, for I have no place to store my crops. His closets were full. His garage was packed. His basement was overflowing. His shed was bulging. His rented storage unit was maxed out. I have no place to store my crops.

So the light goes on- (we can see the little cartoon light bulb above his head) I know! I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul: Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry.

The rich man's problem was not that he was rich- his problem was that he had an "I" disease- I will do this with my stuff. He doesn't check in with anybody else. He doesn't ask for advice from the community. He doesn't look around at his neighbors to see how they are doing. He is ultimately self-referential. The world revolves around him.

The second problem I believe is that he bases his security on his possessions. He puts his trust in his stuff. That's his ultimate concern. And he doesn't give any thought to the future, other than to say, Looks pretty good! I have enough that I can relax, eat, drink, and be merry. I can count on *this* future.

And in the middle of this man's conversation with himself, God breaks in and says, You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. It all ends tonight. The wave of your heartbeat is going to flatten. And the things you've prepared, whose will they be? As someone has said, I've never seen a hearse towing a U-Haul. You're going to be gone, and whose things will they be?

In the first lesson today from Ecclesiastes, the writer, traditionally King Solomon, says that one of the vanities of life, one of the frustrations, one of

the vexations of life, is that you can amass a great fortune while you are living, and you don't know what will happen to it once you're gone. You have no control over how the people who get your stuff will handle it. God says to the rich man who spent his life amassing all this stuff- You were foolish to put all your chips into that which is transient.

And then Jesus offers the punch line- So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.

Here's the key to the story- Jesus does not criticize the rich man for being rich. He doesn't. He worked hard, the land produced abundantly, the weather cooperated. That's all great. The problem was *he wasn't rich towards God*.

What does that mean? Well, let's start with this. Luke's gospel in particular talks about the poor more than any other gospel. Do you remember Jesus's first sermon in Luke chapter 4? His text for the day is from Isaiah- I have come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free. That's his mission statement. In the beatitudes in Matthew, Jesus says, Blessed are the poor in spirit. Jesus in Luke simply says, Blessed are the poor. Period.

If Jesus has a mission statement in Matthew, it would be, I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets. In Mark's gospel, Jesus says, I have come to give my life as a ransom. In John, Jesus says, I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly. And what's his mission statement in Luke? I have come to bring good news to the poor. (Thanks to Mark Allan Powell for this).

So what would it mean in Luke to be rich towards God? Maybe it means being responsible with our stuff. Maybe it means, Loving my neighbor as myself by sharing generously what I have. (see the Good Samaritan).

This theme is all throughout Luke/Acts, because remember Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles. I'm a fan of retired Lutheran Bible scholar Mark Allan Powell, who doesn't think that Luke gives an answer to what we should do. He asks a question, What do you think you should do to love your neighbor?

And then he gives a bunch of different examples, not saying you ought to follow any example in particular. John the Baptist says to the crowds early in Luke, Whoever has two coats ought to share one with the person who has

none. That's a model, isn't it? The disciples gave up their jobs and possessions and followed Jesus. That's one model. There was a wealthy group of women who supported Jesus and his followers. That's a response. Zacchaeus the tax collector has lunch with Jesus, and was so transformed that he said, I'll give half of my possessions to the poor. Luke doesn't say, Everybody ought to do that, but it was right for Zacchaeus.

In September you'll hear the story of the rich man in Luke 16 dining at his table, as poor Lazarus was outside the gate. Jesus in that story doesn't criticize him for being rich. The problem was he didn't listen to Moses and the prophets. What did Moses and the prophets say? Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in the land (Deut. 15:11) Do not mistreat an alien, for you were foreigners in Egypt (Exodus 22:21). Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. That's what Moses and the prophets say. The rich man in Luke 16 is not criticized for being rich; he is condemned for what he didn't do for those in need.

In Acts, also written by Luke, an early group of believers sells everything they have and they pool all their resources, and there is not a needy person among them. That's one model. Luke doesn't say everybody ought to do that. Luke just asks, What will you do to love your neighbor with what you have? How will you be rich towards God?

Luke would say that the problem with riches is that they can become a snare, a trap, they can become all consuming and keep us focused on what doesn't have ultimate value. Jesus will say in next week's gospel, Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. What I treasure is where my passion goes, where my energy goes, my choices, that's where my heart goes. It's critically important to understand what we ultimately treasure, because that's where our heart goes. And yet Jesus affirms that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your *heart*, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

Let me close with a family story. My dad was a pastor in Wenatchee, Washington in the 1960s. A missionary with Youth For Christ came through town and challenged my father to go to Europe and start a ministry for the teenagers of military personnel. My mom and dad prayed about it, and at 50 and 46, with four kids still at home, they felt called by God to go to Germany to start a new ministry.

They needed to raise their full financial support before they went over. That means people giving monthly donations. My dad did fundraising for many months, and was only able to raise half the support. But we got in the car anyway and drove to the East Coast, where we were supposed to fly to Frankfurt for a three-year mission. My father called headquarters to see if any more funds had been raised, and they said, No, you're only half way there, and we won't allow you to go over unless all the support is raised.

We arrived at Kennedy Airport as a sign of faith. At the airport, my father happened to call our host from where we had stayed the night before because we had left something behind. This Christian man happened to ask how things were going. My dad felt called to tell him our situation. This man said, You know what, I've been blessed, and I'd like to take care of the rest of your support. We rearranged our plane tickets for the next night, and went to stay a second night at this couple's house, where he wrote out a check for half of my dad's salary for three years. In today's value it was well over \$100,000.

We found out later that he owned the copyright for a well-known product—they were living on 10% of what he made, and giving the rest away. Now, that 10% was probably more than you and I make. But as Luke would say, That's one example of being rich towards God, by helping your neighbor. Not everybody can do that. The question is, What is God calling us to do, in response to God's grace and love? What is God calling this congregation to do, in response to God's grace and love? Amen.