

31 July 2022

Hosea 11:1-11
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

English Bible scholar Tom Wright proposes that Jesus' parable of the rich fool is first and foremost a parable about Israel's national vocation. When the man comes to Jesus wanting him to arbitrate in a property dispute with his brother, he comes with an attitude typical of many of Jesus' fellow-Jews: the Holy Land wasn't just where they happened to live. In the first century, as in the twenty-first, possession of the Land was a vital Jewish symbol. Families clung to their inheritance for religious reasons as well as economic ones.

Jesus was coming with the message that God was changing all that. Contrary to what might have been thought, God wasn't tightening up Israel's defence of the Land; he was longing to shower grace and new life on people of every race and place. Israel, as far as Jesus could see, was in danger of becoming like the man in his story who wanted the security of enough possessions to last him a long time. Israel was thinking itself into a false position, to which the short answer is God's: 'You fool!' Life isn't like that. The kingdom of God isn't like that. How can being the people of God be ultimately a matter of sacred turf, if Israel is to be the light of the whole world?¹

Someone in the crowd approaches Jesus and demands "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

The man in the crowd was most likely the younger brother: the elder would have received the entire estate upon the death of his father, and it is then his responsibility to distribute it amongst the family members, or to keep it intact.² In this time and culture, the inheritance almost certainly consists of land.

Rabbis were expected to be knowledgeable about the law, and were therefore often called upon to give a legal ruling or to arbitrate in disputes.

¹ These paragraphs quote freely from Wright, *Luke*, p.152-153; with the last sentence coming from Wright, *Twelve*, p.93.

² Garland, *Luke*, pp.512-513

We notice however that Jesus here is not called upon to arbitrate, nor to make a legal judgement between the brothers. The man from the crowd *orders* Judge Jesus to carry out his wishes: he has already decided what outcome he wants and merely sees Jesus as an instrument of enforcement of his wishes.

Jesus declines the man's request; "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" The Greek word translated "arbiter" literally means "divider". There is obviously a broken relationship between the man and his brother leading to the request; to two brothers can't peacefully coexist in working the land together as a unity. Now to divide the land is to finalise the relational breach.

The obvious alternative to "divider" is "reconciler", and while the latter is not referred to in the text, in the Greek there is an implied wordplay because the words translated "divider" and "reconciler" are almost identical.³ And as we have seen elsewhere, this is central to Jesus' ministry: he wants to reconcile people to God and to one another, not to finalise divisions. The possibility of reconciliation, however, depends on the man's willingness to change, to see things differently.

Jesus refuses the man's request, and does not take the role of judge or divider. Instead he uses the opportunity afforded by the man's request to make his larger point. Jesus teaches his disciples, issuing warnings about attitudes of greed and telling an elegant little parable about a rich man faced with an amazing surplus of grain.

There are several things to notice about this parable.

- What the rich man has, has been given by God – the *ground* has brought forth a bumper crop. He has not earned it, and he does not need it.⁴
- Notice how the man regards what he has been given. Throughout the parable the man is constantly talking in terms of "my" – "*my* crops", "*my* barns", "*my* grain", "*my* belongings".⁵
- This man is alone. In his kind of society, dialoguing with oneself in this fashion would be very unusual. Tight-knit communities in villages would find such matters being discussed by the leading men of the village sitting at the

³ *Meristes* and *mesites* respectively. See Bailey, *Peasant*, p.61; Garland, *Luke*, p.513

⁴ Bailey p.64; Garland pp. 513-514

⁵ Bailey, o. 65; Garland, p. 514

gate. This man has no one else with whom to talk and to take counsel. Perhaps he trusts no-one; perhaps he (like the younger brother who spoke from the crowd around Jesus) is estranged from his family. But the result is a warped perspective.⁶

- We should reflect on what the alternative to larger barns might have been. The normal expectation, the expectation reflected in Jewish law, is that the man would share his surplus with those in need.⁷
- Then we should notice that whole exercise of building larger barns turns out to be pointless anyway: when the man's life comes to an end, he won't be the one to enjoy the surplus.⁸ God's question to the rich fool, "Who then will get what you have prepared for yourself?" is one that might well be put to the younger brother so desperate to divide his share from his brother's.
- Finally, the rich fool thinks that his soul, his life, is his to possess – he refers to his soul in the same way that he does his crops and barns, "*my soul*". But in the parable, when God finally speaks it is to say that the man's soul is required of him. The word for "required" in Greek was often used in relation to the repayment or return of a loan. Not only was the man's surplus not really his possession but a gift from God, his very life was a gift.⁹

Jesus concludes with a saying, "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

Israel needs to appreciate that its land, and indeed its very life, is a gift from God. It is not intended for itself alone, but, within God's kingdom purposes, is an instrument by which God is at work to reconcile all peoples to each other and to God.

And now we might be feeling some sense of relief: if this parable is all about Israel's role in God's purposes, then we don't have to confront the painful idea that it might say something about our attitude to money and possessions.

⁶ Bailey, 64-65

⁷ Bailey, 54; Garland, 515

⁸ Bailey, 67.

⁹ Bailey, 67; Garland 515-516.

But that will not do. We can't let ourselves off the hook like that, for two reasons. The first is simply because this whole dialogue and parable make good sense in terms of the attitudes we should each hold towards money and possessions as children of a faithful, generous God who cares for us (as we see in the famous verses that follow immediately).

The second reason we can't ignore the personal application, is because we are the means by which God's big purposes are being enacted in the world and so there needs to be a correspondence between, on the one hand, the big-picture story of how Israel was meant to regard their key possession, the land, within God's plan and purposes, and, on the other hand, our personal attitude towards possessions. Our souls are on loan from God: we are given life for a reason and that reason needs to be outworked in matters as practical as our saving and spending habits.

Money can bring us a great deal of anxiety; and that is true whether we have little or plenty. Jesus has addressed his parable and what follows less to the man with the inheritance question and more to his disciples. Many of Jesus' hearers only just had enough to live on, and there was always the prospect that one day they wouldn't have even that. Most of them would have perhaps one spare garment, but not more. One disaster – the family's breadwinner being sick or injured, for example – could mean instant destitution. And it was to people like that, not to people worried about affording smart cars and foreign holidays, that Jesus gave the clear and striking commands about not worrying over food and clothing that follow the parable.¹⁰ (I find myself reflecting that I was just as concerned about money when my income used to be over twice as much as it is now.) Jesus says:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable are you than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?
[Luke 12:22-26]

¹⁰ Wright, *Luke*, p.152.

Jesus is not suggesting that his followers won't have money-worries; Jesus is not deluded about the difficult realities of life. But what he is challenging us about is our mindset. It is so easy for us to become trapped and enslaved by our possessions or our possessiveness – they can come to, in a very real sense, “possess” us.¹¹ We may get addicted to the buzz of having new things; we find ourselves having to take out insurance to protect the things we already have; we have to make improvements or purchase upgrades to what we already have in order to keep up with the latest fashion or capability; we need to make a good impression relative to our peers, keeping up with the Joneses; and on and on it goes.

And so the mindset change is to keep questions of money and possessions in perspective: within their proper place in terms of what is important in life; within an attitude of gratitude to, and trust in, our ever-faithful, ever-generous, ever-loving God; within the perspective of what *really* matters.

Jesus says

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. [Luke 12:32-34]

In this final appeal, Jesus is not commanding all to get rid of all their possessions. Luke himself, in Acts, describes Christian communities in which most members live in their own houses with their own goods around them, and there is no suggestion that they are second-class or rebellious members of God's people. What Jesus is saying is that, unlike than the grasping, mean, possessiveness of the younger brother who came with the demand in the first place, followers of Jesus need the open-hearted and open-handed generosity that is modelled on God – the Father who is pleased to give us the kingdom! The values of heaven, God's sphere of the created reality, are to be brought to bear on earth in anticipation of the new age in which the two will be joined and under the fullness of God's reign.¹²

¹¹ See the suggestion in Garland, *Luke*, 516, that this sense may lie behind the phrase “They are requiring your soul of you”, where the “they” in question may be the possessions.

¹² Wright, *Luke*, pp.153-154.

Last Sunday we distributed a little pamphlet entitled “Money”. (If you didn’t get a copy, there are some more on the welcomers’ table, or you can pick one up from Christine in the office.) Over the next few weeks we are simply asking that you think about your giving, bringing the parish’s circumstances and your personal circumstances into God’s light. Take a prayerful, honest, open-hearted, open-minded look at the issue, and then make a pledge in response.

I said earlier that there needs to be coherence between God’s big picture for us, his people, and what we do in the practicalities of life. If it really means anything, then faith must mean something for the *whole* of our living. We can face a temptation or a worldview that tries to separate certain areas of life from our faith, and that is perhaps nowhere more true than in the case of our economic life, the area of our decisions around money. This campaign is therefore all about bringing this area of our lives under God’s sovereignty, under God’s love and care, under God’s purposes for us in the world.

As Paul says in Colossians 3, being dead and risen with Christ, we are to seek that which is above, not that which is on the earth. This is not a recipe for a super-spirituality which ignores the real earthly issues we face. It is a case of first things first: the problem is not that we live on earth, but that we too often live *on earth’s terms*. Make this earth your god (as even Israel was tempted to do, by idolising her God-given symbols, and you end up with lies, anger, greed and immorality, the property disputes of the present world. The Creator, meanwhile, serves notice of a higher calling: a full, true humanness, remade in his own image.¹³

Sources:

- Kenneth E Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, Eerdmans, 1980
- David E Garland, *Luke: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Zondervan, 2011
- Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK [2nd ed] 2004
- Tom Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays: Year C*, SPCK, 2000
- Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections: Year C*, SPCK, 2003
- Karl Jacobsen, “Commentary on Matthew 6:19-34 [Preaching Series on Stewardship/Generosity (1 of 3)]”, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-stewardship-generosity-week-1-of-3/commentary-on-matthew-619-34>
- Karl Jacobsen, “Commentary on Luke 12:13-34 [Preaching Series on Stewardship/Generosity (3 of 3)]”, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-stewardship-generosity-week-3-of-3/31449>

¹³ Wright, *Twelve*, p.93 with a little adaptation

- Niveen Sarras, “Commentary on Luke 12:13-21”, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-luke-1213-21-5>
- Pamela Scalise, “Commentary on Hosea 11:1-11”, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-hosea-111-11-5>
- Ryan Schellenberg, “Commentary on Colossians 3:1-11”, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-3/commentary-on-colossians-31-11-5>
- Anna Marsh, “Our Caregiving God”, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/our-caregiver-god>