

**Articles and Sermons :: Let's Be Rich Toward God by John Piper**

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Luke 12:13-21,

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." 14 But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." 16 And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, 17 and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' 18 And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Jesus and the apostles considered money hazardous and helpful. And they taught us how to minimize the hazard, and maximize the helpfulness. And that's what I hope to do today. I would like to spare you the tragedies that money can bring, and I would like maximize your joy in the way you make your money helpful.

Money Represents Value

Now let's make clear immediately that money in itself is simply pieces of metal and pieces of paper. And the reason they are of any concern to us at all is that in our culture we have established that these pieces of metal and paper will function as currency. They will represent value. So money is significant for us simply because we exchange it for what we value. What you do with your money shows what you value with your heart.

We value life and taste, so we give money for food. We value education, and so we give money for books and tuition. We value entertainment (probably too highly), and so we give money for Netflix and ballgames and concerts. We value the ministries of the church and the spread of the gospel, and so we give money to the church and other ministries.

Jesus said here in Luke 12:34, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." The movement of your money signifies the movement of your heart. Where your money goes, your heart is going. You exchange money for what you value, what you treasure.

So when I say that money is hazardous and helpful, what I mean is that the pieces of metal and paper that you have in your pocket or purse have the capacity to show that you value things more than God (which is hazardous), or that you value God more than things (which is helpful). The paper is nothing, but its expression of the treasures of your heart is everything.

The Conviction of This Message

The conviction behind this message therefore is threefold: 1) that where a people (I'm thinking of you now — this church) treasures God above all that money can buy; and 2) where a people understands the biblical teaching that the movement of your money expresses the movement of your heart; and 3) where a people grasps that the local church is crucial for God's work in the world, that people — that church — will have what it needs to pursue God's mission of mercy and evangelization, and to build up the body of Christ; and all the while every member and family in it will be cared for.

So my job, week in and week out, is to point you to the supreme value of God in Christ, and to reveal how the heart moves with its money, and to highlight the preciousness of this local church in our lives.

My approach today will be to give an exposition of this text, Luke 12:13-21, and a longer application using my own experience as a testimony to God's faithfulness.

Confronted with a Choice

Someone approached Jesus and said (verse 13), "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Now Jesus is confronted with a choice— just as we pastors are from time to time. Will he get down into the nitty-gritty of the inheritance dispute, or not? Just a few weeks ago I was drawn into such a dispute. I found Jesus' approach here instructive.

He says (verse 14), "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" In other words my calling is different from what you are asking of me. I do have something relevant to say to you, but I am not the one to be drawn into the details of this dispute. And then he gives a warning about how hazardous this inheritance is. He says (in verse 15), "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

He sees a man losing his grip on his portion of the inheritance. And he sees in him some evidence that the hazard of the inheritance is deceiving the man. This is why Jesus refers to "the deceitfulness of riches" in Matthew 13:22. This inheritance was lying to the man. This is why money is so hazardous. It lies to us. It tries to deceive us. What was it saying?

How Money Lies

It was saying: "If you lose me, you lose a very large part of your life. If you lose me, you lose what life can be for you. I am your life. Do you realize how big I am? Life will be real life— truly life— if you have me." That's what the inheritance was saying.

And Paul knew that's what riches say. Which is why he told the rich in 1 Timothy 6:18–19, "Be rich in good works . . . be ready to share . . . take hold of that which is truly life." In other words, don't be deceived by the message of money that woos you with the words: "I give you life. Your life will be drab and boring and empty and meaningless and unhappy without me. I am your life."

And to this Jesus says in verse 15b, "One's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." In other words. It's a lie. Don't listen. "Take care, and be on your guard." This lie will awaken covetousness, and covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5), and therefore the hazard here is huge. Not only is this inheritance not your life. It is about to take your life.

Which is exactly what Paul said about the hazard of money in 1 Timothy 6:9, "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." Beware! Be on your guard! This inheritance is about to kill you. This is more or less what I said in the dispute a few weeks ago: the issue here is not mainly whether you get your fair share, but whether wanting it so much will destroy you.

What Life Really Is

O how vulnerable the fallen human heart is— mine is— to feeling that having lots of things equals being really alive. And Jesus is urgent and passionate (verse 15): your life does not consist in having lots of things. Life consists in knowing God. John 17:3, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Life is not having things. Life is knowing God. Now Jesus is coming to that.

So Jesus tells them a parable. Not just for the man who asked the question, but for all of us. We are all listening in. So it says in verse 16, "He told them a parable."

The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?" And he said, "I will do this: I will tear 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, be merry." But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.

It is not a bad thing when your "land produces plentifully" (verse 16). It is not a bad thing when your business prospers. It is not a bad thing to receive a promotion and with it a pay increase. It is not a bad thing when your investments increase in value. That is not the evil in this parable. He is not called a fool for being a productive farmer. God knows this broken world needs productive farmers and profitable businesses.

A Damned Fool, Literally

Why, then, is he called a fool? That's the question in this parable. Not only a fool, but a fool who loses his soul. Verse 20: "God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you.'" He was literally and tragically a "damned fool." Why?

Here's the way I would put it: By the way he used the increase of his riches he gave no indication of being rich toward God. He kept building bigger barns. That might be OK — if you're storing the grain for a use that shows God is your treasure. But what does the farmer say? Verse 19: "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" The use he plans to make of his wealth says one thing: "My treasure is relaxing, eating, drinking, and fun." That is my life. And the riches in my barns make it possible.

What's wrong with that? Nothing, if there is no infinitely valuable God and no resurrection. That's why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:32, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" But there is a God, and there is a resurrection. So what's wrong with this man's way of handling his riches is that he fails use them in a way that shows he treasures God more than riches.

Rich Toward God

Here's the key concluding verse that makes the point most clearly (verse 21): "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." The phrase "rich toward God" is unusual. What does it mean to be "rich toward God"? The meaning is plain from the contrast: it is the opposite of laying up earthly treasure for yourself. Being rich toward God is the opposite of treating the self as though it were made for things and not for God. Being rich toward God is the opposite of acting as if life consists in the abundance of possessions not in the abundance of knowing God.

Being rich toward God therefore is the heart being drawn toward God as our riches. "Rich toward God" means moving toward God as our riches. "Rich toward God" means counting God greater riches than anything on the earth. "Rich toward God" means using earthly riches to show how much you value God. This is what the prosperous farmer failed to do. And the result was that he was a fool and lost his soul. That is what I meant when I said, Jesus considered money hazardous. It lures us out of love for God. It lures us away from treasuring God.

Again the issue isn't that the man's fields prospered. The issue is that God ceased to be his supreme treasure. If God had been his treasure what would he have done differently? Instead of saying, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry," he would have said something like,

God, this is all yours. You have made my fields prosper. Show me how to express with my riches that you are my treasure, and the riches are not. I already have enough. I don't need a bigger and bigger safety net. I don't need better food, better drink, better parties. I do indeed want to make merry, but not in self-indulgent parties with rich retirees. I want to make merry with the people who have been helped by my generosity. I want the fullest blessing of giving. Because you taught me, Lord, it is "more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Some Risky Application

That's my exposition. Now here's some application. And I am going take the risk that Paul took several times in his letters and give my own testimony with regard to my handling of money — or I should say No! — and my handling of money, because what's mine is hers. Paul said, for example to the elders in Acts 20:33–35,

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

It's risky to speak of yourself (Matthew 6:2–4), but hear me like this as your shepherd, as a father. I am testifying, not commanding. I am trying inspire you with God's faithfulness not coerce you with demands. I am taking my cue from 2 Corinthians 9:7 "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Not under compulsion. I want you be radical, generous people (to be "rich toward God") because God is your treasure, not because I demanded that you tithe. So Paul tried to inspire the Corinthians with the example of the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8:1–7 and with his own example in 1 Corinthians 9.

Five Ways to Guard and Maximize

So here are five things I do to guard against the hazard and maximize the helpfulness of money. I hope they inspire you to figure out your way.

1. I study to see and savor the supreme value of Jesus above all earthly things.

This means I read my Bible daily with on this quest so that I can say with Paul in Philippians 3:8, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him." I am daily on a quest to see him this way.

2. I pray that this would free me from the love of money.

"Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!" (Psalm 119:36). "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" (Psalm 90:14). Expose the deceitfulness of riches, O Lord, by revealing your superior value.

3. I trust in God's promises for every need to be met (for my family and the church)

"My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33). I rest my soul on these promises.

4. I set aside electronically our regular gift to the church, and then add spontaneous gifts in the worship services.

I take my cue here from Paul's teaching that giving should be regular and free—disciplined and spontaneous. For example, he says in 1 Corinthians 16:2, "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come."

This points to the wisdom of planned, regular, disciplined giving. Sporadic giving with no plan will probably mean you are not treating giving as an integral part of your worshiping life. So to secure the disciplined part of our giving I go online and tell BBC giving page to take the amount out of my checking account every pay check.

And since we want to make plain and teach our children and remind ourselves that giving is an essential aspect of our heart's worship we have always built it into our services. That's the meaning of that moment in worship: "We treasure you, O God, in this very service by valuing you over the money that we are giving up. We prefer the joy we receive in seeing your mission advance." That's what we say with our offering in worship every weekend.

When I joined Bethlehem I made a covenant along with 3,151 of you to "contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry and the expenses of the church."

Many of you did not grow up in homes where you had any teaching or modeling of how to give to your church. So consider me your father in this service. I love you and want for you your fullest joy. The main reason for allowances to children as soon as they can count is to teach them that regular, disciplined, proportionate giving to the church is normal Christianity.

And if you ask "how much?" my answer is start with the Old Testament standard and build on that, as God prospers you. It is hard for me to imagine the children of God after the glories of the cross give less to the church than the saints of the Old Testament.

5. Finally, I put protections in place against bigger barns and I turn the prosperity of my fields into blessings for others.

Three ways. First, I surrender the copyrights and all the royalties of all my books to the Desiring God Foundation which keeps about ten thousand dollars in the bank and gives away to Desiring God and Bethlehem all the rest. I have no legal access to any of this money.

Second, I surrender all my honorariums to Desiring God and Bethlehem. This way I limit my income to what the church pays me.

And, third, each year Noë and I, as a regular practice, increase not only the amount we give to Bethlehem, from our salary, but the percentage as well. If you don't put something like this in place, you will call more and more and more things needs which are in part only wants.

The reason for these three limitations on our income take us back to the beginning of the sermon. Jesus and the apostles considered money hazardous and helpful. It's hazardous and therefore I encourage you to put limits on how much of you keep for yourselves — not how much you make, but how much you keep. And its helpful, which means you get the incredible joy of giving more and more to the causes that you love.

God As Our Riches

And lest there be any misunderstanding, if you are a businessman and turn a \$200,000 business into a \$200,000,000 business not by glittering your lifestyle, but plowing profits back into job creation and the expansion of worthy goods and services, you have done the right thing. The issue is not that the man's fields prospered. The issue was: What did he do with it?

May the Lord grant us all the joy — the sheer unadulterated joy — of finding our life not in possessions, but in the abundance of all in God, and in fulfilling our covenant commitments, and in showing the world what it means to have God as our riches. Amen

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