

## STORIES THAT PACK A PUNCH

### Study 5

## The Supreme Stupidity

The Parable of the Rich Fool, as it has often been called, is part of many a gospel preacher's repertoire. Here was a man who thought only of this life, piled up his possessions and died unexpectedly. And Jesus said that God described him as a fool. As valid as these observations are, there is a richness in the teaching of this parable that we miss if we confine its meaning to this warning about the foolishness of materialism and the supreme importance of being "rich toward God."

### WHAT?

#### 1. The Setting

Jesus is teaching a large crowd. First he addresses his disciples (Luke 12:1). The focus of his teaching is on matters of spiritual importance. Someone in the gathering crowd asks him to pronounce judgment on an important family issue. The petitioner is not asking Jesus to arbitrate. He knows exactly what he wants. He attempts to *use* Jesus for his own ends. This is more of a demand than a request. Some speculate that the man's brother was a follower of Jesus arguing that he wanted to use the influence of Jesus on his brother to get what he wished. At any rate, he approached the rabbi (that's what 'Teacher' means) with the demand, "Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!"

The assumption is that the father had died leaving the inheritance as a unit to his sons. In all probability, the inheritance was land. Apparently there was some disagreement as to how the inheritance should be divided. The rabbis taught that if one brother wanted a division of the inheritance, it should be granted. So this man is, in effect, saying, "I am right and my brother is wrong. Rabbi Jesus, tell him so." Kenneth Bailey points out that "this petitioner is unwilling to consider his problem from any perspective other than his own."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined Ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976 and 1980), 60.

Jesus' answer has a strong tone of disapproval. He refuses to be 'used' in this way, but there is even more to it than that. There is obviously a broken relationship between the two men. The petitioner wants (what he regards as) his property, even if this exacerbates the broken relationship. So the man wants to relegate Jesus (who came to reconcile) to the level of a divider of property. There is, quite rightly, "a tinge of gruffness" in Jesus' response: "Man, who appointed me a judge and an arbiter between you?"

## 2. The Parable

The parable is sandwiched between two 'wisdom sayings': "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (12:15), and "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God (12:21).

"Greed" was the real problem. The petitioner's real problem would not have been solved if his brother had granted him the portion of the inheritance to which he thought he was entitled. One commentator translates greed as "insatiable desires." That's the thing about greed: it is never really satisfied.

The man in the parable was rich even before his ground produced a bumper crop. So he did what most people would do in his situation. He thought about the pleasant problem posed by his huge surplus. Eventually he decided to expand his estate. Obviously he needed bigger barns to store his huge crop. Then he could take early retirement. Freed from the need to earn a living, he could enjoy life to the full. 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?"

## 3. The Interpretation

As we take a closer look at the parable, we make some interesting discoveries:

- In verse 17, the text is in the continuous past. It reads, literally, "the man *was debating* with himself." In other words, he mulled over his problem for some time.
- He simply describes his harvest as "my crops." There is no indication of gratitude. He saw the crops as his possession, not God's gift.
- He does not even contemplate using his unanticipated surplus to help the poor. The church father, Ambrose, observed that the rich man did have storage in the mouths of the needy. That kind of generosity is taught in

both testaments (Lev 19:10, 15; 23:22; 25:25-47; Deut 15:4-11; 2 Thess 2:7-12; Eph 4:28; James 5:1-6).

- In the Middle Eastern context the man's 'aloneness' must have been conspicuous. In that part of the world, life was and is lived in tightly knit communities. The people are gregarious and discuss matters like this among themselves for hours. The individual makes up his own mind, but he does so in community. He does his thinking in a crowd. But this man dialogues with himself. Bailey comments: "When he needs a dialogue, he can talk only to himself. Thus we begin to get Jesus' picture of the kind of prison that wealth can build. He has the money to buy a vacuum and live in it."<sup>2</sup> His little soliloquy is actually quite pitiful.
- The NIV conveys the sense of what he was saying in idiomatic English. The man said, literally, "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods, laid up for many years . . . ' But into his tidy resolution comes the thundering voice of God: "You fool! This very night, your soul (life) will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"<sup>3</sup>
- The man is described as a fool. Actually, there is a play on words here. The man who thinks that his many things (*euphorēn*) will produce the good life (*euphrōn*) is in reality a fool (*aphrōn*). "His formula for the good life is sheer stupidity . . . (God says), 'Look at what you have done to yourself! You plan alone, build alone, indulge alone, and now you will die alone.'"<sup>4</sup>
- What this man fails to realize is that his life is a loan from God and so, for that matter, are all of his possessions. He keeps using the possessive pronoun: "my crops, my barns, my gain, my goods, my soul." When God announces that his soul will be required of him, the word used is the word commonly used for the return of a loan. So, his life wasn't his in the first place.
- The final 'wisdom saying' complements the initial 'wisdom saying': "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." So, Jesus refused to address the presenting problem and provide a 'solution' that would leave the questioner no better off (perhaps worse off). The real problem was not the division of the inheritance but

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<sup>2</sup> Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 64.

<sup>3</sup> The word translated 'soul' is *psuchē* which translates the Hebrew *nephesh*. It refers to the whole person.

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 67.

greed; in other words, it was the desire to serve self rather than to serve God (by serving others, including the man's brother).

#### 4. Important Implications

- Relationships are more important than things. Perhaps this *was* a 'legitimate' cry for justice. But Jesus refuses to heed such a cry when it contributes to the further breakdown of the relationship.
- Material possessions are gifts from God and each life is on loan from him.
- To think that security and happiness is to be found in material possessions is stupid.
- The abundant life is to be found in being "rich toward God."
- It was not the fool's wealth as such, but his attitude towards his wealth that destroyed his capacity to maintain abiding relationships.
- Jesus places the accent where it belongs, refusing to treat symptoms when the treatment will only exacerbate the real disease.

#### **SO WHAT?**

1. So, what's wrong with a decent retirement, anyway?
2. What does this encounter (and the ensuing parable) tell us about Jesus and his mission?
3. What is the main point of this parable?
4. Respond to this reasoning: "It is God's will to bless his children materially. Therefore every Christian can and should be prosperous. If a Christian is poor, it is an indication that he/she is not trusting God."

#### **NOW WHAT?**

1. How tied are you to your possessions?
2. Respond to the statement: "We ought to love people and use things, not to love things and use people."
3. Is it all right for a Christian to be rich? (1 Tim 6:17-19)