

Rich in God

Luke 12:13-21 (NIV)

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; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." ¹⁶ And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. 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 my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain 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 whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

Imagine a crowd of thousands of people listening to a sermon. The pastor is preaching a rousing sermon that warns people to watch out for false prophets because their teachings will harm your soul. He's just finished a section encouraging you to boldly share your faith and to correct false teachers with the confidence that the Holy Spirit will teach you what to say at those times. Then a man from the crowd shouts out, "Hey pastor, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." (verse 13) What?? What's that got to do with the sermon? Was this person even listening? This is the situation Jesus found himself in.

Now, there are some cultural differences to account for. While I can understand someone coming to their pastor because they're seeking guidance for a Christian way to defend their property rights, hopefully the person also understands that your pastor is not a legal advisor or expert. Yet, in Jesus' day, it was common practice for people to go to respected rabbis (religious teachers) to resolve legal disputes such as this. In this way, the man's request is not totally out of line.

But if this man's interjection still seems jarring and disconnected, you're not alone. Maybe even Jesus felt that as you hear him respond: "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" (verse 14) But instead of dismissing the man and moving on with his sermon, Jesus used the man's interjection as a teachable moment for him and for all of us. Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." (verse 15)

To illustrate the point, he tells the parable of a certain rich man. The man was rich because he had been blessed with an abundant harvest. So, he built bigger barns with the idea that he can kick back and just enjoy the wealth, giving no thought to God or what God planned for his life. Thinking that he was set for life with his abundance of possessions, we learn that that very night the rich man was going to lose it all and die unable to enjoy any of it.

Jesus says these things to pinpoint that the man requesting that Jesus mediate an inheritance dispute had his heart in the wrong place. While Jesus was warning the people to watch out for false teachings and the damage they could do to their souls, this man was consumed in figuring out how he would get his possessions. He was living like the rich fool, living with a greedy heart, thinking life consisted in the abundance of his possessions, not in what God was offering him.

How about you? Do you find yourself in the man from the crowd, a man who thinks his life consists in the abundance of possessions? I can't read your mind or your heart. I don't know if your reason for getting up every day is to make money to buy the stuff, build up the nest egg, get enough so that later you can "take life easy, eat, drink and be merry." (verse 19) Maybe it's not even about possessions as if you are always striving for the bigger house, the newer car, or the latest toys. Maybe the driving force in your life is for the wealth of experiences, that you have those memories, those photos of all those exotic places, that you really lived your life by getting out there and exploring the world. Are these the things that get you up and moving every day? Is this your life?

If our lives consist in an abundance of stuff or experiences, when will God say of us, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (verse 20) When we die, we can't take the stuff with us. Even what we leave behind may not be used as we intended. Then what was the point of our lives? That's why Solomon called all that toil under the sun, a life lived thinking it's about the abundance of possessions, as meaningless.

To top it all off, Jesus let us know that this certain rich man in the parable did not have God in mind because he was consumed with his pursuit of possessions. So, when God demanded his life from him, he did not possess God. His life seeking an abundance of possessions was his god. He was a spiritually poor fool, poor in God, condemned to hell as an unbeliever. "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God." (verse 21) Jesus' words cause us to pause and ask, "Am I rich toward God?"

That phrase – “rich toward God” – maybe you heard it and thought like I did. I immediately went to thinking about how much I give in the offering plate, as if being rich to God was about money. Then I realized I should expand that out the idea of being rich toward God to the things I do in service to God, the giving of my time and talents. But, while those things are related to this phrase, they’re not the point of the phrase nor really how Jesus is using it. This sermon is not really about tithing.

“Rich toward God” is maybe understood in our English ears better as “rich in God.” The word “toward” can also be translated as “in,” but it can be understood with either word. The reason Jesus wants us to watch out for false teachers and to boldly proclaim to them God’s Word in its truth and purity, is because God has made us rich already and he wants us to share those riches with others. This is what Jesus wants this man consumed by thoughts of getting his inheritance to hear and understand, to put his mind instead on life consisting in an abundance of what God has done for him, what God has given to him.

How are we rich in God? Well, let’s start with the concept of sin. Sin is anything that is not God’s perfect standard, anything that falls short. This is anything we have ever done, thought, or said wrong ever. Sin is any time that our minds have been consumed by getting more stuff or experiences, doing the work to get the stuff, instead of listening to Jesus, instead of living in the riches he offers. These sins are always against God, and they always create a debt. How do you pay for the debts that our sin, my sin, have racked up? It’s not with money or offerings or good works or prayers or stuff. In fact, everything we own, all that stuff that we take credit for that we’ve worked so hard to gain, they’re all gifts from God anyway. We are spiritually and physically indebted to God for everything in our lives. Without God, we are completely poor.

We could not pay the debt of sin that we owe to God, but God stepped in to pay our debts. That’s why Jesus came down from heaven and took on flesh and blood like us. He didn’t live perfectly for himself, to store it up in some treasury of merits. He lived a whole life for us, was perfect for us in our place. He didn’t suffer and die for his benefit, but for ours. He paid the exorbitant and impossible prices for all our debt of sin and our lack of perfection. He didn’t do this to refinance a debt to God, but to wipe it out. He does not stand as our creditor but as someone who gives an incredible gift that does not require nor takes repayment. God doesn’t need our money. No, he used his riches to make us rich - rich in the forgiveness of sins that he paid for, rich in his perfection that he obtained for us, rich with the everlasting luxury of a heavenly home with him purchased with his life and death. We are all rich in God!

Knowing that we are rich in God, it changes how we live, motivates us to be rich in other aspects of life. The one who is rich in God will work hard to provide food and clothing for his or herself as well as his or her family but not worry about not having enough in the future as the future’s in God’s hands. The person who is rich in God knows that there’s more to life than the abundance of possessions, that they can’t buy you lasting happiness, pay for your sins, or gain a way into a right relationship with God or to heaven. The one who is rich in God recognizes that only God gives these greatest riches in existence.

When we are rich in God, those riches will pour out of us when it comes to our offerings at church, and I’ve seen it. When Brian and Eric, our Church’s Financial Secretary and Treasurer, report month to month, I see how you, being rich in God, give your treasures to serve the Lord and others – whether you have an abundance or not. I see that you, being rich in God, give of your time and talents to help plan, prepare, and execute a Bible Camp for the kiddos of our community. I see it in how you give of yourself in all the roles here in worship, in making a cookout happen with all the food and the setup and cleanup. I see it in how you give of yourself to each other in friendship and support with all the conversations buzzing around before and after worship. Since you are rich in God, you are rich to others.

So, no, life is not about an abundance of possessions; it’s about being rich in God, possessing the one thing that’s needful. God has made us rich with our sins paid for and wiped out, with a full and perfect life of Jesus covering us, and with the gifted inheritance of the eternal luxurious life with him in heaven. We are rich in God and now use those riches to make other rich in God as well. Amen.