

The Parable of the Rich Fool

By Dr. Dave Neale, Ph.D.

Jesus had a penchant for raising uncomfortable topics. Hypocrisy, cowardice, false pretense, avarice, and just generally any religious tom-foolery.

The topic of wealth and the “denunciation of its misuse are frequent in the ancient world.”¹ It is in the canonical material, as in our reading for the week in Ecclesiastes, where the writer worries that a fool will inherit all that he owns (Eccl 2:18-19). Also in Psalm 49 for the week, **...fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others... mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like animals that perish** (Psalm 49:10-12).

It is a subject of comment in the early Jewish writings and Greco-Roman writings. Seneca (Roman philosopher, died 65 ce) said, “O what blindness does great prosperity cast upon our minds.”²

We don’t choose to talk about avarice and self-interest here today because it is a fun topic. We are talking about it because Jesus talked about it. There are three significant parables about money, all in Luke, who had a particular interest in the topic.³ On every page of Luke and Acts there is some reference to the poor, about material wealth, and the idea that a disciple seeking the kingdom of God requires a radical reorientation away from the culture on wealth and privilege.⁴

And we don’t shy away from uncomfortable texts just because they are, well... uncomfortable. So let’s talk about the Parable of the Rich Fool. Among the several ways the parable is understood, the plain sense is that this is story of how **not** to act with money! A “negative example story.”

Behind the Text

So let’s get our heads clear. What we need to do to understand this parable is to reflect on the *sitz im leben*, the situation in life, in which the speaker and hearers lived. *Sitz im leben* is a phrase often used in biblical studies and its definition is this:

“It stands for the context in which a text, or object, has been created, and its function and purpose at that time.” Wikipedia

Let’s consider what we call the “implied reader” of this story. To whom was the story being told and how does reflecting on that help us understand the point of the teaching?

Let us imagine that Jesus and his disciples have made it as far south as Shechem, in Samaria, half-way between Galilee and Jerusalem. Samaritan country, but that isn’t really the point here.

He is standing on a hill overlooking the estate of Qawarant Beni-Hassan near Shechem, who owned about 2,500 acres.⁵

There are many beautiful buildings, ancient tombs, stone towers. There is still a village there.

“French explorer Victor Guérin visited the village in 1870, and estimated it as having about 150 inhabitants. He described the town as being in decline, but with great remains of former better times. When he was visiting, a squad of bashi-bazouks were rounding up 35 villagers, and taking them to Nablus as they had not paid their taxes.”

Here, in sight of the fig trees and rows of vines, the fields of grain, Jesus' teaches on the distribution of excess supply, or in this case the failure to distribute excess supply. It says in vs 1 that **...the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another.**

No wonder the authorities were alarmed. Jesus told them ***I tell you friends, do not fear those who kill the body... but fear him, who after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell...*** (Luke 11:4-5).

He looks angrily from his starving followers to the fields of Beni-Hassan. I think Jesus was upset, "Mr. Beni-Hassan, you would do well to wake up." Some have suggested that the storing of the surplus grain was part of a scheme to drive up the market price.

Apropos. I saw in an article Friday how ExxonMobil and Chevron made record profits this quarter. In the 2 minutes it takes you to fill your tank with 20 gallons these two giants make more than \$400,000 in profit in that time. What a society does with its excess wealth matters.

We aren't against capitalism. But what a society does with its excess matters. The Canadian government collects \$6.6 billion in gasoline taxes every year, Exxon Mobil had \$17 billion in net profit in the second quarter. Let's tax them and fix our medical system.

We are aware, of course, that our Lord chose a life of itinerancy, which is a lifestyle of poverty. He himself had no means of income. He had abandoned his trade, as had his followers. He commands the 72 he sends out Luke 10:4-7, ***Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road... eating and drinking whatever they provide*** [their host homes; see also Luke 9:1-6].

They are a band of homeless wanderers possessed of a mission that their leader described as the coming of the kingdom of God.

We know that Jesus was supported by a loyal group of women who gave of their means.⁶ For example, ***...the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources*** (Luke 8:3).

The reality of Palestine at this time was that of want and need and the possibility that the next meal may fail to arrive. 70% of the population engaged in agriculture, 90% lived in rural areas and most people were subsistence farmers working on land they did not own.

People who are comfortable and well-fed don't go tramping about after prophets in the countryside. 99 out of 100 people were outside of the ruling classes.⁷

Profligate public works expenditures, insatiable taxation, tax-collectors, confiscation of goods and crops. This was the experience of those who heard Jesus speak this parable.

The produce of the land, so romantically conceived, as Joshua crossed the Jordan and his people at from the land, the land flowing with milk and honey, had now become encumbered by the insurmountable colonial powers of those who owned the land.⁸

In this cultural context you can see the appeal of messianic figures and hopes of a perfect world to come, one in which the land of Israel would, once again, ***satisfy the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things*** (Psalm 107:9) – a return to a land flowing with milk and honey.

Josephus said that the siege of Jerusalem and its destruction "[taxation] was considered to be the only cause of the war."⁹

The question in times of colonial occupation, and the question in our own society with its ultra-rich 1% and the obscene profiteering of oil companies, as in Palestine at this time, was always this question: "... who gets the material or economic surplus"?¹⁰

In the Text

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" (Luke 12:13-14)

Unlike most parables, which Jesus tells without application or explanation, this parable is one he introduces with its meaning. We are not left in doubt about his meaning.

And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15)¹¹

It does not say, 'your life does not consist in possessions.' Of course, we all must have possession. Compare this to the prayer, ***Give us enough bread for today*** (Luke 11:3). Jesus does not condemn us in our need. But we are to be aware of placing the meaning of life in what we possess.

In God's abundant provision "bread" is not just that which fills the belly, but

- that which fed Jesus when he had no food,
- that possession of the Kingdom of God transcends all other meanings in life.

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Jesus, Luke 12:15

In 1 Cor 15:32 Paul quotes a Greek proverb from Menander: ***If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."***

"These things you have prepared, whose will they be? Such is the case with a person who builds personal treasure but is not rich toward God." (LTJ translation)

'The abundance [εν τω περίσσειειν] of your life is not defined by what you have, even if it is more than sufficient.' (Fitzmyer)

The point of the story of the man who builds more barns is that life is not about our ease and security, but about being rich in our relationship with God.

Snodgrass calls the modern quest for a comfortable retirement a "rich fool's soliloquy."

The man says, ***And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.***

If we think our lives are about making a killing so we can retire early in comfort we are missing the point of life. It is to "live productively, reflecting the character of God in all our relations."¹²

It doesn't mean you can't be a rich Christian, of course you can, but it is about what we do with the surplus.

Jesus said, ‘You presume to come to me about your inheritance? Really?’ Jesus shakes his head, with a glance toward the estate and then back to the man. “Life is a gift from God. No amount of possessions, however abundant, can make it greater or give it security.”¹³

In the parable God says, ***‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’*** (Luke 12:20)

From the Text

“A parable like this can strike a tender nerve.”¹⁴

A Brooklyn pastor was robbed of \$1,000,000 in jewelry in front of his congregation of 25 people last Sunday. Defending his habits he said, “It’s my prerogative to purchase what I want to purchase. If I worked hard for it, I can purchase what I want to purchase.” (CNN, July 26, 2022) I don’t think anyone argues with that.

I’m not judging the man (well, I am actually). But it is about what you do with the surplus.

And I leave you with this. Following the parable Jesus says this to his disciples. I simply give you his words. They are a source of comfort and peace to all who seek the kingdom – a motherly/fatherly care so astonishing, that if you can hear it, it will change the way you live:

22 He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. 24 Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! 25 And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? 26 If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? 27 Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 28 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, you of little faith! 29 And do not keep seeking what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. 30 For it is the nations of the world that seek all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

32 Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Thanks be to God. Amen

¹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, p. 390.

² Ibid

³ Luke 12:16-21, 16:1-13, 19-31.

⁴ Snodgrass, p. 389.

⁵ See Neale, *Luke 9-24*, p. 99. Other stories about large landowners in Luke, 16:1-9, 10-13; 19:12-27. This Benni-Hassan not to be confused with the tombs of the Middle Kingdom in Egypt of Beni Hassan.

⁶ Luke 8:1-3, 10:38; Mark 15:40-41//Luke 23:49//Matt 27:55-56

⁷ “Without exception, one finds pronounced differences in power, privilege, and honor associated with mature agrarian economics.” John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, p. 45.

⁸ It is important to understand that when abundance was held in the hands of the few, like Benni, let's call them the 1%, social unrest associated with the masses becomes politically explosive. When large portions of a populace feel excluded from what they need, this is a dangerous time for the cohesion of a culture.

Recall in Acts 11:27-30 that famine gripped the land in the mid-40s under the reign of Claudius, and that Paul ***sent relief to the believers living in Judea*** (Acts 11:29). 20 years later the country exploded in rebellion.

⁹ Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 126, references *Bella Judaica*, 5.405

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 44.

¹¹ ἡ πλεονεξία, greediness, insatiableness, avarice, covetousness, 'a desire to have more.'

Περίσσειεν, intransitive verb in the infinitive, "be left over, be more than enough, increase, abound, or abundance"

¹² Snodgrass, p. 401.

¹³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 198.

¹⁴ Snodgrass, p. 400.