

Greed, Grace, and Having Enough
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Luke 12:13-21

How you hear this story depends entirely on your point of view.

Imagine with me that you are in what most people would call the “upper class.” You might even be in the top 5%.

Here in Minnesota, that means you make at least \$244,000 per year.¹ So you’re not filthy rich, but you are “well off.”

You may have inherited a little money,
or at least had family help with college costs,
but mostly you worked hard for what you have.

You scrimped and saved and grew your investments ethically,
and you never took advantage of anyone or mistreated anyone to do it.

And now you are reaping the rewards of your hard work.

You have an elegant but understated home, drive nice cars,
your retirement plan is secure, and you have everything you need.

Now listen to the story.

“The business of a rich man succeeded abundantly.”

Well, good for him! you think. He must have worked hard.

And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my money and all my possessions?’

Well, I had trouble finding a good place to store my boat last winter.

Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my homes and build larger ones, and there I will store all my money and my goods.

*Yeah, that’s a bit extreme, to tear down a house
instead of just buying a bigger one. But maybe it was a great location.*

And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

And why not? He deserves it.

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/24/how-much-money-you-have-to-earn-to-be-in-the-top-1percent-in-every-us-state.html>

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’”

Wait just a minute! you think. Why is he a fool?

He planned ahead. Saving is good.

Sure, you can't take it with you. We all know that.

*But does that means it's bad to have wealth?
to work hard and reap your just rewards?*

No, it's not. But that reading is through the lens of wealth.

This time let's imagine a different scenario.

Imagine with me for a moment that you are hungry.

Not just “Is it time for lunch yet” hungry,

but deep-down, stomach-gnawing,

“haven't eaten anything but Raman noodles in two days” hungry.

You have sold everything of value you possess,

and it hasn't been enough to pay your bills.

You have turned to friends and family in the past,

but now even they are refusing your calls.

You soon will lose your home, and you have no idea where to go

except for the soup kitchen where you used to volunteer.

You can't afford your medication, and that toothache is only getting worse.

You have no job prospects and no hope.

Imagine that this is your life, when you hear this story:

“The business of a rich man succeeded abundantly.”

Lucky him! you think.

And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my money and all my possessions?’

Oh, poor guy! I feel so bad for you.

Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my homes and build larger ones, and there I will store all my money and my goods.

*Seriously? You can't think of anything better to do with a house
than just tear it down?*

When people are living on the streets?

You get my point, right? How you hear this story—

indeed, how you hear many stories—
depends on where you are.

So let's look at it from the point of view of the people in Jesus' time.

In the world in which this story was told, two important things were true:

- 1) an abundant crop was seen as a gift from God.
- 2) and if one person had more than enough, somebody else didn't have enough.

The rich man doesn't thank God,
apparently doesn't even think of God,
nor does he think of anyone else.

As a wealthy landowner, he would have inherited his land,
and there is nothing to indicate that he worked the land,
that he did anything to bring the crops to harvest.

Others did that work.

And yet the literal translation of the words used to describe the harvest
is "the fruits of me."

He doesn't think of all those who harvested his crops for him,
and whether he's paying them a living wage.

Evidently it doesn't even occur to him that others might be hungry.

Apparently he would rather risk his grain decaying or get moldy
or get eaten by rodents than share it with his neighbors.

We know this because his whole speech is filled with first person pronouns.

"What should **I** do, for **I** have no place to store **my** crops?

I will pull 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."

He's so I-focused he even carries on conversations with himself!

Greed has made everyone else invisible.

This story reminds me of the famous scene from the movie Wall Street.

Gordon Gekko, a corporate raider played by Michael Douglas,

said this in an address to stockholders:

“The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed – for lack of a better word – is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms . . . has marked the upward surge of mankind.”

I think we can all agree that this is a lie.

Greed is not good. Greed has not “marked the upward surge of humankind” but has instead marked the downward decline of anyone on the other end of the stick.

Greed has contributed to runaway profits while workers and consumers suffer, and has led to gross inequities in income.

The book of Ezekiel tells us:

“Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.”

I think that is part of why the rich man in our story was called a fool— not because of his wealth, but because of his greed.

But I don’t think that’s all of it.

I think the rich man is called a “fool”

“because he accords finite things infinite value.”²

“He goes astray by believing that his wealth can secure his future, can make him independent—from others, from need, from God.”³

It sounds silly. Of course we know that things don’t bring meaning.

Of course we know that possession don’t define us and a new car won’t fill the emptiness.

But it’s so easy to fall prey to the heresy.

Every time we turn on the TV we are told that we aren’t complete, aren’t good enough as we are, so we look around with critical eyes.

It’s not that we don’t know better.

It’s not that we believe that granite countertops will give our lives more meaning.

It’s that, often without recognizing it, we get sucked into the belief that any THING can.

² Lose, David. “Commentary on Luke 12:13-21.” workingpreacher.org

³ Lose, David. “Money Can’t Buy Me Love.” workingpreacher.org

I am reminded of the musical Hamilton.

At one point in the story Alexander Hamilton has gotten in trouble
with his commanding officer, George Washington,
and he is sent home from the war.

When he gets there he discovers that his wife, Eliza, is pregnant.
He's happy to hear the news, but he also wants to go back to the battle.
She keeps saying,

"Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now."

He asks her, *"Will you relish being a poor man's wife
Unable to provide for your life?"*

She responds, *"I relish being your wife.*

Look at where you are. Look at where you started.

The fact that you're alive is a miracle.

Just stay alive, that would be enough....

*So long as you come home at the end of the day
that would be enough.*

We don't need a legacy. We don't need money.

If I could grant you peace of mind, if you could let me inside your heart....

Oh, let me be a part of the narrative in the story they will write someday.

Let this moment be the first chapter where you decide to stay

And I could be enough

And we could be enough

That would be enough."

Even without hearing the amazing Phillipa Soo sing it,
the lyrics can move a person to tears.

Her longing to be enough for her husband,
her longing for their family to be enough for him—
it's palpable.

But the very next song has Alexander rushing back to war
because Washington has called him back to give him a troop to command.

And later when Alexander makes some really bad relationship choices,
we realize that in spite of Eliza's love, their family isn't enough for him.

He was right when he proclaimed earlier

"I have never been satisfied."

The musical portrays Alexander Hamilton as a man whose brilliance,

drive for recognition, and obsession with his legacy
keep him so restless that nothing is “enough.”

What about you? What is it you always want more of?

What is it to which you can never say “No thanks, I have enough.”

Now let’s pause here for a moment.

Just because you don’t have enough of something,
just because you yearn for something,
doesn’t mean it’s bad.

If you don’t have enough friends in your life,

I’m not saying “You’re being greedy to want friends.”

That’s not greed. It’s human need.

The question isn’t what you long for,

but what you always need more of, what you can’t get enough of.

Do you crave more affirmation, praise, accolades?

Can you not get enough of being right, or being perfect?

Do you build up bigger barns of power—you call it influence—

or maybe control,

either to control others

or to keep a tight fist on every aspect of your own environment?

Do you hoard self-sufficiency, so that you need no one?

Maybe our bigger barns are for our stuff.

And maybe our bigger barns are for our success or our ego

or our independence.

I have four question for you this morning I’d like for you to take with you.

The first is the one I just asked: “What do you always need more of?”

Second: “What would it feel like to have enough?”

Enough money, enough status, enough praise, enough control.

What would it feel like to have enough?

Third: “What would it feel like to BE enough?”

And fourth: “If you could see yourself both as HAVING enough and BEING enough,
how generous could you be?”

Our parable ends with a warning against those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.

But what does that mean, to be rich toward God?

Well, this is stewardship season, so I must start with the obvious—
that we are called to be generous in giving to the Body of Christ.

The church depends on its members and friends
to be generous and give as they are able.

But that's not the whole story.

And although this text doesn't give us the answer,
it is found in other stories we've heard this month.

Being rich toward God entails using one's resources
for the benefit of one's neighbor in need, as the Samaritan did.

Being rich toward God entails giving generously of our abundance to the poor,
and righting any wrongs like Zacchaeus did.

Being rich toward God means seeing the world around us
and recognizing we cannot claim our success as ours alone,
and being thankful for our abundance.

My paternal grandfather was a farmer.

He never made it past eighth grade.

He had limited knowledge of the world beyond land and livestock,
but he knew both and stuck with what he knew.

His farm was his livelihood and his inheritance for his children.

There was a time in the life of their little country church in Scott Depot, WV,
when there were problems.

People were upset with the pastor, and some of them were leaving.

"Hank, you leaving, too?" they asked.

"Naw, I'm not goin' nowhere," he responded.

"Why not?"

"Well, when we built this church building,
I gave the deed to my farm as collateral.

The bank is still holding that deed."

That is being rich toward God.

But that wasn't the end of the conversation.

My grandfather said, "The bank is still holding that deed. . . .

And I wouldn't leave even if they weren't."

He made a commitment to his church, and he intended to keep it.

May we go and do the same.