

The Parable of the Rich Fool



The Parable of the Rich Fool | Rembrandt, 1627 | Gemäldegalerie, Berlin | PD-US | also known as The Money Changer

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ He replied to him, “Friend, who appointed me as your judge and arbitrator?” ¹⁵ Then he said to the crowd, “Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions.” ¹⁶ Then he told them a parable. “There was a rich man whose land produced a bountiful harvest. ¹⁷ He asked himself, ‘What shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns and build larger ones. There I shall store all my grain and other goods ¹⁹ and I shall say to myself, “Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!”’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’ ²¹ Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God.” (Luke 12:13-21)

Warnings of the Coming Judgment

This text, as well as the Gospels for the two following Sundays, comes in a section of Luke (12:1-13:9) where exhortations and warnings are given by Jesus in preparation for the coming judgment. Culpepper (*Luke*, New Interpreter’s Bible, 255) writes of the transition from vv. 1-12 to vv. 13-21 with:

Continuing the theme of this larger section, the next verses shift from confession of Jesus to forsaking the security of material possessions. Those who confess Jesus look to God for their security, not to their own ability to accumulate possessions and lay up wealth for the future.

Our text is connected with the verses that follow by the sense of possessions (desiring more than what is needed) and by the word *psyche* (v. 19 twice, v. 20, v. 22, v. 23). This word is translated as “soul” or “life” in these verses. *Psyche* is that mysterious thing that makes me “me” or you “you.” It is

everything that makes a pile of organic materials come to life as an individual -- life force, soul, spirit, breath, personality, etc. In modern parlance we use the word “self”.

Related to this, our text is an illustration of what Jesus had said at the beginning of this entire section: *“There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the darkness will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed on the housetops.”* (12:2-3). Most of our parable is “hearing” the inner thoughts of the rich man -- what is in his *psyche* -- what is his true “self”.

Commentary

The dispute and the parable appears only in Luke among the gospels, situated within the on-going travel narrative as Jesus and the disciples move ever forward towards Jerusalem. Although the inheritance in question (v.13) is not specifically mentioned as land, given the parable’s setting (v.16) one might safely assume land was the issue.

In the western legal system, inheritance law, the core function of inheritance laws is to provide a legal framework for the transfer of ownership of a deceased person's assets (real estate, personal property, financial accounts, etc.). The laws prioritize the rights of certain family members, particularly spouses and children, ensuring they receive a share of the estate. In general, the western version of the law does not serve a social function, e.g., helping to manage wealth distribution and prevent excessive concentration of wealth in the hands of a few.

In ancient Israel there were biblical laws regarding land and inheritance (see Num. 27:1–11; 36:7–9; Deut. 21:16–17 – shown at the end of this document).

he *bêṭ-āb* was the basic unit of Israel’s system of land tenure, each having its own *naḥālā* (inheritance) of land, and therefore intended to be economically self-sufficient. The intention of Israel’s land tenure system, namely that ownership of land should be as widely spread as possible with broad equality over the network of economically viable family units, was embodied in and protected by the principle of *inalienability*. This was the rule that the land should remain in the family to which it had been apportioned, and could not be sold permanently outside the family. It was a rule tenaciously adhered to through Israel’s history, as far as the evidence points. The whole OT gives us no single example of an Israelite voluntarily selling land outside his family. Recorded land transfers were either kinship redemption (Jeremiah 32, Ruth), sale by non-Israelites (2 Samuel 24; 1 Kgs 16:24), or nonvoluntary mortgage of land for debt (Neh 5:3). Nor is there any inscriptional evidence from Palestine of Israelite sale and purchase of land, even though there are abundant records of such transactions from Canaanite and surrounding societies. The only legal method by which land in the OT period “changed hands” was by inheritance within the family. Even Ahab recognized this, when faced with Naboth’s stand on this principle (1 Kings 21). The means used to circumvent it and the forcible confiscation of Naboth’s family land show the grim fulfillment of Samuel’s prediction as to what monarchy would entail for the previously economically autonomous families of Israel. [ABD 2:763]

The Question of Inheritance

One of Jesus’ hearers was having trouble with his brother about the proper division of an inheritance. Jewish laws of succession covered most cases (cf. Deut. 21:17), but there was sometimes room for doubt and in this case the man who spoke up felt that an injustice was being done. His brother was clearly in possession and he wanted Jesus to persuade him to quit his claims. He does not ask Jesus to decide on the merits of two claims: he asks for a decision in his own favor. He seems to be acting unilaterally for nothing indicates that the brother had agreed to have Jesus try the case. The man is taking Jesus as a typical rabbi, for the rabbis customarily gave decisions on disputed points of law.

Jesus is interrupted in his instruction of the disciples. Besides being rude, the interruption betrays an

insensitivity to what Jesus has just said about matters of essential importance. Jesus sees behind the question the very greed he warned the Pharisees about (11:39–42).

Jesus' admonition in 12:15, "*Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions,*" provides a commentary on the previously narrated request for arbitration, warning against the danger of the possession of material wealth, even when it is inherited. Life is defined not by objects, but by relationships, especially to God and his will. Several OT passages state the same perspective: Job 31:24–25; Ps. 49; Eccles. 2:1–11, and Sir. 11:18–19.

Jesus refuses to be recruited as the arbitrator in a dispute over the division of family holdings, addressing instead the dispositions out of which he apparently perceives the man's dispute to have arisen. He uses the opportunity to tell a parable about the trap of possessions.

A Word About Greed

"*Take care to guard against all greed*" The text uses two verbs (*horate & phylassesthe*) in the present tense imperatives, i.e., continual action, in other words "continually take care" and "continually guard yourself from." Perhaps this is a Lucan warning that the human condition is akin to alcoholics and their desire for alcohol, we are never cured of our greediness. We are always in recovery; always in need to watch out for and to guard ourselves from this evil power in our lives.

The word *phylassesthe* is rooted in the word *pleonexias* (definitions from Lowe & Nida's Greek-English Lexicon)

1. "A strong desire to acquire more and more material possessions or to possess more things than other people have, all irrespective of need." The word is usually translated with *greed*, *avarice*, or *covetousness*.
2. "taking advantage of someone, usually as the result of a motivation of greed." The word is usually translated with *exploitation*.
3. When *pleonexia* is used in the Septuagint it is always for the Hebrew word *betsac* which carries the idea of "unjust, illegal, dishonest or evil gain". It is similar to the "plunder" one gains through violence.

This is the only instance of any word from the *pleone-* word group in Luke. While the second definition doesn't fit this context, it too is a fair warning for the human condition. The need to be on guard is that if greed is a desire to get more, then there is never a point where a greedy person has enough. Greed can never be satisfied. It is always looking to get more. This is why St Paul, using related words, calls greed "idolatry": (Ep 5:5, Col 3:5). Here is a quick list of NT Scripture dealing with greed

- 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 : We need to drive the greedy out of the church.
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 : The greedy will not inherit the kingdom of God
- Ephesians 5:3-5 : The greedy will not inherit the kingdom of Christ and of God
- Colossians 3:5-6 : Greed is part of our earthly nature and brings God's wrath
- Romans 1:28-31 : Greed is a result of idolatry.
- Luke 12:13-21 : Jesus warns us about wanting more.
- Mark 7:21-23 : Greed comes from within us and defiles us

Scripture also lists the "cure" for greed.

- Luke 12:22-31 : Don't worry. God will provide what you need.
- Luke 12:32-34 : Sell your possessions and give to the poor.
- Luke 18:18-30 : Sell all your possessions and give to the poor.

- Luke 19:1-10 : Give half of one's possessions to the poor.
- Luke 21:1-4 : Give everything that one has.
- Acts 2:42-47 : Share possessions with other believers for the sake of the needy
- Acts 4:32-37 : Communal ownership of all property for the sake of the needy.

The Parable of the Poor Rich Man

The parable is not, however, unique to Jesus – consider this passage from Sirach 11:18-19

¹⁸ *A man may become rich through a miser's life, and this is his allotted reward:*

¹⁹ *When he says: "I have found rest, now I will feast on my possessions," He does not know how long it will be till he dies and leaves them to others.*

It is possible Jesus' parable finds its roots in Sirach even if it is not directly dependent upon it. The parable stands within the Wisdom tradition of Israel in which it is held that having or seeking wealth can be a person's downfall (cf. Ps 49:1-20; Sir 31:1-11 – as well as outside the canon of Scripture in *1 Enoch* 97:8-10; 98:3).

The parable warns against covetousness (12:15) and greed (12:21), set with the larger framework of the dispute over inheritance and a series of sayings concerning anxiety over the necessities of daily life, such as food and clothing (12:22-31). The immediate context is the dispute and the declaration by Jesus that the measure of a person's life does not consist of the abundance of his or her possessions.

The inner monologue on the part of the landowner is characteristic of at least some of Luke's parables (cf. 12:45, 15:17-19; 16:3-4; 18:4-5; and 20:13). It gives the reader access to the thoughts known only to the individual and to God. The rich man has a situation he needs to face – with the bountiful harvest he simply does not have storage space. So he develops a plan of action – build additional storage space – something Joseph prudently chose to do in his time (cf. Gen 41:48) – nothing wrong with the decision.

We might question why he wants to build larger barns – why not simply build additional ones? These questions are not addressed in the parable, nor are they normally in such a genre. It is typical for parables to portray an "all or nothing" activity.

In v.19 the monologue reveals a smug self-assurance that *he* has provided for him and his family in such a way that they shall want for nothing. Notice the repeated *my* (four times in vv. 17–19 while *I* occurs eight times in the Greek) which points to an ingrained selfishness. Not recognizing the beneficence of God, it does not occur to him to praise God or to share with the larger community. The man is not concerned about using his wealth wisely. He is trying neither to serve God nor to help other people. One commentator titled this parable as "How to Mismanage a Miracle." He relates the surplus and storing of food to the Joseph story in Egypt. In that case, the food during the time of plenty was stored so that it might feed all the people during the future famine. In the parable the "miracle" harvest is stored for the owner's own enjoyment not for the community. An abundant crop was a sign of God's favor.

The rich man of our story is not even concerned to have a richer and fuller life for himself. He is concerned only with self-indulgence. His well-satisfied response is to "*rest, eat, drink, be merry!*" for the years to come. The rich man expresses a clear Epicurean thought in v. 19 with a major exception. He only remembers the good part of the philosophy and ignores the negative. The Epicureans sought to live the good life of eating and drinking now, "for tomorrow we die." The same thought is expressed in Isaiah 22:13b: "*Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*" (quoted in 1 Cor 15:32). This man thinks he can live the good life now, because he thinks his future is safe and secure in his new storage bins. He gives no thought to death.

God's answer in v.20 underscores the foolishness of the rich man as this very night the man not only loses all his possessions, but also his very soul. Green (*The Gospel of Luke*, 491) comments:

This farmer has sought to secure himself and his future without reference to God. This is the force of the label given him by God, "fool," used in the LXX to signify a person who rebels against God or whose practices deny God [footnote: See e.g., Prov 14:1; Jer 4:22] -- a usage that coheres with the representation of "greed" (v. 15) as a form of idolatry. He did not consider that his life was on loan from God. Failing to account for the will of God in his stratagems, he likewise failed to account for the peril to life constituted by the abundance of possessions (v. 15) and for the responsibility that attends the possession of wealth. He thus appears as one of several exemplars of the wealthy over whom "woe" is pronounced in the Gospel of Luke (cf. 6:24). Such persons are not simply those with possessions, but more particularly those whose dispositions are not toward the needs of those around them, whose possessions have become a source of security apart from God, and, thus, whose possessions deny them any claim to life.

Cuplepper also notes that the Greek word, *apaiteo* used in v. 20 ("demanded") can refer to the collection of a loan. Interestingly, the only other use of this word in the NT is Luke 6:30 where believers are not to ask for their goods back.

What happens to his property? One assumes he has heirs, harkening back to the dispute between the two brothers. But the question is never answered as it is not the important question at hand. It is not what matters to God.

And as with most good parables, the parable does not answer the very question it poses: what is important to God. The parable is meant to draw in the hearer to answer that question based on the Word of God, prayer, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. How would you answer?

All is vanity

The rich man would be the envy of most people — so wealthy that he does not have room to store his goods. But he is a fool because in the midst of his good fortune he has lost the sense of what is really important. He imagines that he can control his life. Possessions create this kind of illusion. The rich man is really poor in the sight of God. He does not even think about the possibility of sharing what he has with others. The implications of this story will be carried further in the tale of another rich man (16:19–31).

Luke has joined together sayings contrasting those whose focus and trust in life is on material possessions, symbolized here by the rich fool of the parable, with those who recognize their complete dependence on God (Luke 12:21), those whose radical detachment from material possessions symbolizes their heavenly treasure (Luke 12:33–34).

The gospel for this week is paired with a reading from *Ecclesiastes* in which "the Teacher" asks: "*Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!...For what profit comes to man from all the toil and anxiety of heart with which he has labored under the sun? All his days, sorrow and grief are his occupation; even at night his mind is not at rest. This also is vanity.*" In the second reading, St. Paul reminds us, not of vanity, but of the more problematic, as he warns us, "*greed that is idolatry.*"

The Teacher reflects on the futility of accumulating wealth, wisdom, and pleasure. After testing every form of worldly success, he concludes: "*All that my hands had done and all the toil I had spent in doing it was seen to be vanity and a chase after wind, with nothing gained under the sun*" (Eccl 2:11).

Though the Teacher amassed great possessions, he found no lasting satisfaction. Greed, or the endless desire for more, is shown to be spiritually bankrupt—it cannot deliver the peace and permanence it

promises. Even achievements and riches are left to someone else who “*did not toil for it*” (Eccl 2:21), which deepens the sense of futility. Jesus echoes this wisdom in our gospel reading.

Both texts warn us that greed distracts us from the deeper purposes of life. It blinds us to our mortality and tempts us to seek control over what ultimately belongs to God. In contrast, a life “rich in what matters to God”—marked by generosity, trust, and humility—leads to true fulfillment. As stewards rather than owners, we are called to use what we have for the good of others and for the glory of God.

Notes

Luke 12: 14 *who appointed me as your judge and arbitrator?*: *tis me katestēsen kritēn ē meristēn eph’ hymas*, reflects the words of Exod. 2:14 (LXX): “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?” (*tis se katestēsen archonta kai dikastēn eph’ hēmōn*). In Exod. 2 the statement is uttered by two Israelites, living in Egypt, quarreling with each other who are confronted by Moses, who attempts to stop the fight.

Luke 12:15 *take care to guard*: *phylassesthe*, ‘guard yourselves’ is the taking of positive action to ward off a foe

Luke 12:16 *he told them a parable*: “them” can mean either the two brothers or the crowds as a whole (v.13). ***rich man...land*:** The beginning of the parable provides no moral assessment of the rich man. The “land” (*chōra*) can refer to an entire district, land in general, or to a farm. Given a bountiful harvest is mentioned, a farm is best suited.

Luke 12:20 *God said to him*: There is no description of the modality of communication – directly, via a dream, or by an intermediary.

***you fool*:** *áphrōn* This is the same term in Greek used in Ps 14:1 (LXX) “The fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God.’” The word also appear frequently in the Wisdom literature to refer to someone who rejects the order of the world articulated by the wise, that is, one who refuses to acknowledge the dependence upon God [EDNT, 1:185] See also Job 34:36–37; Ps. 14:1 [13:1 LXX]; 53:1 [52:2 LXX]; Eccles. 2:1–17).

***your life will be demanded of you*:** the literal translation from the Greek is “they are demanding your soul from you.” The subject of the sentence (they) is unclear. Perhaps it refers to the angels, who carry the dead into heaven as in Luke 16:22 (cf. Job 33:23; Heb. 2:14). It may also reflect a Semitic circumlocution for God (cf. Job 4:19; 6:2; Prov. 9:11)

***life*:** *psychē* - literally “soul.” In classic Greek *psychē* is the vital force that resides in people and finds its expression in breath. In the LXX the Hebrew *nepeš* is translated with *psychē*. The Hebrew term which *psychē* renders is a fluid and dynamic one which it is hard both to define and to translate. The root means “to breathe” in a physical sense. Breathing is a decisive mark of the living creature; its cessation means the end of life. The root thus comes to denote “life” or “living creature.” Departure of the breath is a metaphor for death. The alternation of breathing (cf. the use of the verb in Ex. 23:12; 31:17) corresponds to the fluid nature of the terms life and death in the OT. Life and death are two worlds that do not admit of sharp differentiation. Sickness and anxiety, which constrict the breath, are manifestations of the world of death. Basic to both breath and blood is the idea of the living organism. Every form of life disappears when these leave the body. Gen. 9:4 finds the life in the blood, and Lev. 17:11 sees in blood the seat of the life (cf. also Dt. 12:23). There is no concept here of a blood-soul; the obvious thought is that of vital force. Most importantly *nepeš* denotes the total person, what he or she is. Gen. 2:7 expresses this truth, although more in relation to the external aspect than to the modalities of life. What is meant is the person comprised in corporeal identity. Yet the total personality, the ego, is

also involved. The noun can thus become a synonym of the personal pronoun (Gen. 27:25; Jer. 3:11). [TDNT, 1344]

Luke 12:21 *rich in what matters to God*: literally, “rich for God.” The final (rhetorical) question underlines that the pursuit of possessions is futile in view of one’s ultimate priorities and the real meaning of life. Some OT passages that convey similar notions are Job 27:16–22; Ps. 39:6; 49:6; 90:10; 103:15–16; Eccles. 2:18–23

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Old Testament Laws on Inheritance

Numbers 27

¹ Zelophehad, son of Hepher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh, son of Joseph, had daughters named Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. They came forward, ² and standing in the presence of Moses, the priest Eleazar, the princes, and the whole community at the entrance of the meeting tent, said: ³ “Our father died in the desert. Although he did not join those who banded together against the LORD (in Korah’s band), he died for his own sin without leaving any sons. ⁴ But why should our father’s name be withdrawn from his clan merely because he had no son? Let us, therefore, have property among our father’s kinsmen.” ⁵ When Moses laid their case before the LORD, ⁶ the LORD said to him, ⁷ “The plea of Zelophehad’s daughters is just; you shall give them hereditary property among their father’s kinsmen, letting their father’s heritage pass on to them. ⁸ Therefore, tell the Israelites: If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall let his heritage pass on to his daughter; ⁹ if he has no daughter, you shall give his heritage to his brothers; ¹⁰ if he has no brothers, you shall give his heritage to his father’s brothers; ¹¹ if his father had no brothers, you shall give his heritage to his nearest relative in his clan, who shall then take possession of it.” This is the legal norm for the Israelites, as the LORD commanded Moses.

Numbers 36

⁶ This is what the LORD commands with regard to the daughters of Zelophehad: They may marry anyone they please, provided they marry into a clan of their ancestral tribe, ⁷ so that no heritage of the Israelites will pass from one tribe to another, but all the Israelites will retain their own ancestral heritage. ⁸ Therefore, every daughter who inherits property in any of the Israelite tribes shall marry someone belonging to a clan of her own ancestral tribe, in order that all the Israelites may remain in possession of their own ancestral heritage. ⁹ Thus, no heritage can pass from one tribe to another, but all the Israelite tribes will retain their own ancestral heritage.”

Deuteronomy 21

¹⁵ “If a man with two wives loves one and dislikes the other; and if both bear him sons, but the first-born is of her whom he dislikes: ¹⁶ when he comes to bequeath his property to his sons he may not consider as his first-born the son of the wife he loves, in preference to his true first-born, the son of the wife whom he dislikes. ¹⁷ On the contrary, he shall recognize as his first-born the son of her whom he dislikes, giving him a double share of whatever he happens to own, since he is the first fruits of his manhood, and to him belong the rights of the first-born.