The Rich Fool
Luke 12:13-21

Over the summer we're looking at the stories Jesus told – and as I said a couple of weeks back, if you come to the Bible with an image of Jesus as 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild', you're in for a shock. Not least because Jesus goes places in his teaching that leave us uncomfortable, and he talks about stuff that we wish he didn't, including money.

In fact, if you read the gospels, you'll discover that Jesus talks about money a lot. Which if, like me, you grew up in a culture where you don't talk about money at all – is a problem. And yet, it's not the *fact* that Jesus talks about money – it's what he says about it that's so challenging. And you hear what he has to say and it makes you feel uncomfortable, and you think, 'well, Jesus couldn't possibly want me to feel uncomfortable, because that's not the therapeutic Jesus I believe in, so he can't possibly have meant what he's saying.' So we try and wriggle out from under his words. Except, he does mean what he says, and it's that very reaction to his words that tells us that something's not quite right in our hearts. And that is why Jesus talks about it. You see, ultimately, Jesus isn't after your money, he's after something way more valuable and more costly – your heart, your total allegience. And he knows that when he changes your heart that will fundamentally change how you see, and handle, and value wealth.

So he told a story – which we call the Parable of the Rich Fool:

Reading: Luke 12:13-21

From this parable we're going to look at first the danger of wealth, then the foolish way to handle wealth, and then what it means to be wise in wealth.

The Danger of Wealth
So, if you noticed, Jesus' story is triggered by a man asking him something: v13: 'Someone in the crowd said to him…' So, there's this crowd listening to Jesus. And what's interesting is what they've been listening to, because in the passage above Luke tells us that Jesus has been telling them that God is the God who cares for the sparrows; that he's the God who knows the hairs on your head – so you don't need to live in fear, or be consumed by anxiety, because, v7, 'You are of more value than many sparrows.' And then he tells them that they don't need to be anxious about defending their faith before others, because the Holy Spirit will stand by them. He'll be there for them when they most need him.

But then this man in the crowd speaks up: v13, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Now, don't you think that's ironic? Jesus has been telling them that you can trust God with your life, that you are of great value in his sight, and that has the power to kill fear and anxiety, and this man is thinking 'I need this money, I need to talk to Jesus about helping me get this money'. Now, why does he come to Jesus like this? Well, just practically, this thing is on his mind, isn't it. His parents have most likely died and left all the inheritance to his older brother, but that older brother is now refusing to split the inheritance with him. And he's asking Jesus to come in on his side. You see, because Jesus spoke a lot about money he's probably heard Jesus talk about it before, and he knows that Jesus understands the hold money can have on you

and so he wants Jesus to tell his brother, 'older brother, money's bad, and it's got a grip of you, so you need to give some to your brother.'

It's interesting, isn't it, how we can so clearly see the faults in others that we're blind to in ourselves, and how we wish Jesus would go and speak to so and so about something, because they really need to hear it! And here is a guy who wants Jesus to talk to his brother about money, when his own desire for more, or even his desire for what might be rightfully his, is in danger of blinding his eyes, and closing his ears, to what Jesus is telling him.

And in response Jesus says, v15, "Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." You see, these brothers are being torn apart by greed and covetousness. It's eating away at both of them. Because the one who has, doesn't want to let go, and the one who doesn't have, wants it. And Jesus isn't going to be their arbitrator on this surface issue, because he hasn't come for surface issues, he's come for their hearts.

And so he goes to the heart issue that's lurking behind this desire to hold on, or to have more – and that's to think that your life *does* consist in what you possess. That you get your identity, your security, your sense of self-worth, of how you see yourself in comparison with others, from what you have – the abundance of your possessions: maybe that's as small as having the latest smart phone, because all your friends at school have it, or it's your car, or your apartment, or your salary, or your pension. And you think, life consists in *this*.

It's why, if you remember, when Paul writes to the Colossians, he describes covetousness as idolatry, and he says the same to the Ephesians (Col 3:5 and Eph 5:5). Because you think, if I can have this – a new phone, the latest look, a nicer home, a better car, a larger pension, I'll be ok, I'll be happy, I'll feel good about myself and about the future, I'll feel secure. 'So Jesus, tell my brother, or my parents, or my boss, or God, to give it to me.' And this other stuff takes the place of God in our lives. It becomes an idol. You won't feel good about yourself, or happy about life, or secure without it.

And Jesus says, watch out for that kind of thinking. Be like a sentry guarding against this silent enemy of your heart. Because it will take you by surprise, it will sneak up on you, you will drift into this kind of living and thinking, and you won't even know it. And just like this man, we all tend to think that someone else has the problem: it's him, or her, who earns more than me, who *has* more than me, he's the one with the problem. *I* just need a bit more. And Jesus says, be on your guard against wanting what you don't have with the kind of wanting that undermines your peace and contentment and security in God.

So, let me ask you: how are you doing in this area of wanting more, of covetousness? I'll tell you how I'm doing: I struggle with this. A catalogue comes through the door, and I see all this stuff that I don't need, but suddenly find I want! And when you can't afford it, or your parents won't let you have it, it breeds discontent. And that is covetousness.

And yet, by any measure, in comparison to the rest of the world, you and I already have masses, don't we. Whether you're the poorest student, or the richest executive, God has filled our laps with wealth and it is running over. The question is, what are you supposed to do with it? Well, that's why Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool.

How to be a Fool When it Comes to Wealth

Verse 16: 'And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully."' So, how does Jesus describe this man? He's *rich* – he's already rich, and then God chooses to prosper him some more, and his estate produces a bumper harvest. So, he hasn't grown rich, or even more rich, through cheating or doing anything immoral, has he? He hasn't dodged his taxes or done any dodgy deals. His land has produced plentifully, probably because he's worked hard and farmed wisely, and he's reaped the reward.

But what is this additional prosperity for? Is it for himself – to enjoy? Well, he thinks so, doesn't he: v17-19: 'And he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear 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."'

So, he thinks this abundance is all about him. Five times he uses the word 'my': *my* crops, *my* barns, *my* grain, *my* goods, *my* soul. Why? Because he thinks he's the owner. And his solution to his dilemma of what to do with his increased wealth is to increase his storage capacity; to beef up his pension pot; to add to his investment portfolio; to build bigger barns. Now, again, just like he didn't get the wealth illicitly, so now he's not wasting it like some profligate spender. He's not living it up like some playboy, he's not embarrassing himself and blowing it on round the world trips and a superfast donkey with spoilers. He's making prudent plans for his future and allowing himself to enjoy life a bit.

And having taken care of the storage problem, he relaxes to a life of leisure. He takes early retirement. Verse 19 again, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up *for many years*.' But it's a retirement of self-indulgence. Sure he's looking to the future, but it's a future that is entirely self-centred, and this extra wealth was for *him* to enjoy. As one commentator has said, (Nolland in Bock): with such wealth "his responsibilities have only just begun" and yet, here he is, aiming for nothing more responsible than reclining on a deck chair and mixing a gin and tonic. He thinks he is only responsible for himself.

But, what does God think of that? Verse 20: 'But God said to him, 'Fool!''

Now, when you die, what do you want written on your gravestone? What would you want God to inscribe there? Or when you stand before him, what do you want to hear him say to you? Imagine a gravestone that reads, Here lies the body of Martin Slack – He lived and died a fool. None of us want that, do we? And yet

Jesus says there is a way of handling wealth and prosperity that God sees as foolish.

And so, if we use our increase, our surplus, to get more stuff, and build bigger barns, what does that say about the state of our hearts? What does it say about what we're really worshipping?

Verse 20 again: 'But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' You see, this rich man thought he was lord of all he surveyed. He thought it was for him to decide what he did with his wealth and how he lived his life. And then he discovers he must give an account, and all his self-centered financial planning, and living, came crashing down around him. As Earle Ellis says in his commentary, the rich man thought he was an owner, but he found he was owned. He thought he was the landowner, and he discovered he was a tenant. And not only was his wealth not his own, his life wasn't either. And neither is ours.

And this man who was looking forward to relaxing and sitting down, finds himself standing before the judgment seat of God. And his barns are full, but he stands empty before God. And that, if you'll excuse the pun, is a grave error.

Ok, but why is he a fool, when all he did was what so many people do?

Firstly, because he allowed his wealth to dull him to what really mattered. In Jesus words, from v21, he had laid up treasure for himself, instead of being rich toward God. Fundamentally, his treasure – what was most important to him - was in the wrong place. He had invested in the wrong fund.

Secondly, because he didn't look far enough ahead. Sure, he wasn't only thinking about today - he saved, he invested in his pension, he planned for his retirement, he did everything that today we would could wise financial planning, he just didn't look *far* enough ahead. He hadn't reckoned with the fact that one day - a day over which he had zero control – his soul would be required of him. So sure he was rich, but he was also short-sighted.

Thirdly, he was a fool because he used his excess money to increase his own comforts, when he should have attended to other things, as we'll see in a minute.

But then look at v21, where Jesus says, '*So is the one* who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.' God calls this man a fool – but Jesus' point in telling the story is that if our attitude to the possessions that God gives us is no different, we're no better than the fool.

So, what should we do with the wealth and prosperity God gives us?

How to be Wise with Wealth

Well, Jesus tells us what our attitude should be in v21: rather than lay up treasure for ourselves, we should be 'rich toward God'. Great, but what does that mean?

Well, look what Jesus says later on in this chapter, in v33, "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail." And so instead of using our God given wealth to accumulate more stuff, or make our lives more comfortable, we're to have a radical change of thinking, and use it to alleviate suffering.

And so Jesus' criticism is not against wealth creation – after all, God is the original wealth creator and it's him who gave the rich man his wealth – it's against the use of that wealth for ourselves alone.

And God prospers us so that we can use our money to see the needy cared for – the physically and spiritually needy. To see Bibles translated, and missions funded, and churches planted, and the gospel preached and the starving fed and the naked clothed and the poor educated. As John Wesley said, 'earn as much as you can, save as much as you can, give as much as you can.' And those of us with kids, just imagine what resources could be released for the kingdom, over generations, if we got a vision for the kind of living and giving that sets a limit on our expenditure and then gives everything else generously away, and then taught and modeled it to our children?

But how do we get there? How do we get to the point where possessions and accumulating wealth doesn't have this hold on us, and we don't think our life consists in stuff, and we're set free to be generous? How can you become wise and not a fool when it comes to money?

Well, listen to what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8. It's in a passage where he's commending the sacrificial giving of a church to the needy. 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich' (v9). And at the cross Christ gave up everything, so that you and I who have nothing might have everything. He emptied himself so that we might be filled. He became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him. He became poor so that we might become rich in God. And that, Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, is the foolishness of the cross – but it's the wisdom of God. And so real wisdom – not just in dealing with finances, but in all of life, comes from having your heart transformed by Jesus. Because the way of the cross tells you that to give is better than to receive, that the way down is the way up, that if you want to save your life you must lose it, that if you want to rule in life, you must serve. That it's by giving yourself, and your stuff, away that you become truly rich: rich in your heart, rich in your soul, rich in your relationships, rich in your character. Because you know that Christ who was rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake became poor – for you.

So, being wise is about getting your treasure right. Jesus says later in v34 'For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' And so if covetousness is idolatry, you can root it out by true worship – because you know your life does *not* consist in wealth and possessions and financial security, that that's not where your value, or your ultimate security, or your worth lies. Instead, your life

consists in Christ. And we can give away earthly treasure because we know he's our ultimate treasure, and comfort, and joy, and security. That he is of infinitely greater value than stuff. And we want others to experience that too.

So, the wise person knows where his treasure is. But secondly, the wise person looks to eternity. He's far-sighted not short-sighted. He knows like the fool didn't know, that one day his soul will be required of him. The rich fool thought it was all his, and looked no further than his retirement. The wise person knows it's all God's, and that Christ is risen from the dead and reigning on high, as king and judge, and so he looks beyond retirement to the day when he will stand before Christ.

So, if we're to be wise in how we handle wealth, we'll get our treasure and our perspective right.

But thirdly and finally, if we're to really be wise, and grow in giving and generosity, you've first got to receive. In 2 Cor 9 Paul writes, 'whoever sows sparingly, will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver' (v6-7). But then he immediately follows that with 'And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work' (v8). So it's God's grace that will enable you to do this, Paul says. Of ourselves we struggle with covetousness and wanting to keep, but as we allow the gospel of his grace, of Christ's giving and Christ's generosity to transform our hearts, it opens our hands. And the result, Paul says, is sufficiency, enough; enough for us and abounding generosity and good works toward others.

So, the danger of wealth is covetousness. The foolish way to handle it is to think it's given so that we can have more. But the wise way to handle it is to live knowing Christ is your treasure, and with eternity in view, and allowing his grace to change our hearts and open our hands in generous, joyful giving.