**The Rich Fool**
**Luke 12:13-21**

Over the last few weeks we've seen that, as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, he's pouring teaching into his disciples, showing them what it means to be his disciple. And one of the things he talks about a lot is money. Which is interesting, because sometimes, I suspect, it's the very thing we wish he didn't speak about. Because when we read what he has to say about money and wealth, it leaves us – who have money and wealth, feeling guilty, and challenged, and we think Jesus couldn't possibly want us to feel like that. That's not the comforting, therapeutic Jesus we have been told to believe in, so we come up with these fanciful interpretations of what Jesus must really have meant, all in an attempt to wriggle out from under his words. When what he really meant is pretty plain. You see, becoming a disciple of Jesus, He says, will fundamentally affect how we see, and handle wealth.

And this next block of teaching Jesus dives into, which we're going to look at this week and next week, is triggered by a man in the crowd asking Jesus to take his side: v13, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.' In response, Jesus spells out first the danger and then the wrong and the right way to handle wealth.

**The danger of wealth: covetousness**
Now, if you were here last week, you'll know that Jesus has been impressing on the disciples their need to trust God rather than please people, even when opposition comes. But this guy in the crowd has other things on his mind. His parents have most likely died and left all the inheritance to his older brother, who is now refusing to split it with him. And he's asking Jesus to come in on his side.

So here he is, listening to Jesus teach about God caring about the intimate details of our lives – the God who knows every sparrow and every hair – the God who calls us to be prepared to pay the price of allegiance to Jesus, and this man is thinking about his earthly inheritance. That's what is foremost in his thinking. That's what's keeping him up at night, that's what's eating away at him: Money and wealth and how to get what is rightfully his. After all, isn't his request valid? Isn't it fair that the inheritance be shared between the two brothers?

But as I've thought about this man in the crowd this week, isn't it uncanny how he represents us, and how money and possessions and the desire for more can crowd out what really matters, and close our eyes and ears to Jesus? Here he is, with a front row seat to listen to the Son of God teach and he's thinking about fields and houses and bank balances and what should be rightfully his. The dollar signs before his eyes are blinding him.

And in response Jesus says to everyone listening, 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, this family, these brothers are being torn apart by greed and covetousness. It's eating away at both of them. And Jesus goes to the heart of this man's issue: the temptation to think that your life is all about what you possess. Because if you think that is what life is about, and that is what you are here for, and that security and happiness are to be found in wealth and

possessions, that will drive your desire for more, which is covetousness and greed.
And Jesus says, watch out for that. Be on your guard against that kind of thinking. Be like a sentry guarding against this silent enemy of your heart. Take active steps to defend yourself against this. It will take you by surprise, it will sneak up on you, and overtake you, and you won't even know it. And everyone thinks it's the other person who has this problem. It's him who earns more than me, who has the problem. I just need a bit more. And Jesus says, be on your guard against all covetousness, against all forms of greed, of wanting what you don't have. You see, it was covetousness that brought about the downfall of humanity in the first place. Adam and Eve could eat of every fruit of every tree in the garden, except one. But they had to have the only one they couldn't have. And ever since we have faced this same silent enemy.

And we are surrounded by encouragements to greed and covetousness. That's how modern advertising works: by making you discontented with what you have now. You will only be really happy, really attractive, really content, if you have *this*, whatever *this* is. And, as one writer (Piper) has said, we only have to look at how much we own, and how little we give, to see how the battle against covetousness, is going.

And, in response, Jesus says, life is not about your possessions. Life is not about greed, it's about God. And twice in his letters (Col 3:5 and Eph 5:5) Paul describes covetousness as idolatry – this stuff, possessions and wanting more of them, takes the place of God, and becomes a functional god in our lives, because we believe it will offer us security and happiness.

So let me ask you: how are you doing in the battle against greed and covetousness? In a recent essay entitled 'Dethroning Money to Treasure Christ above all', Randy Alcorn writes,

'Some believers ask each other tough questions: "How are you doing in your marriage? How much time have you been spending in the Word? Sharing your faith? Guarding your sexual purity?" Yet how often do we ask, "Are you winning the battle against materialism?" Or, "Are you cutting your spending and increasing your giving?" Or, "Have you been peeking at those tempting magazines and Internet sites? You know, the ones that entice you to greed?"

'Financial stewardship seems to be the last bastion of accountability. People are more open about their sexual struggles than battling materialism. Some churches are talking about getting out of debt. I applaud that. But you can be out of debt and still be stingy and greedy. We don't need to become smarter materialists; we need to repent of materialism.

'Ask people at your church if they can point out prayer warriors. Most can. Now ask them to point out *giving* warriors, people who have chosen a modest lifestyle so they can give away 100 percent above that to God's kingdom. The fact that the term "giving warrior" isn't in our vocabulary says it all, doesn't it?'

So let me ask you again: how are you doing in this battle? I'll tell you how I'm doing: I struggle with this. I struggle with this urge for more. And as a family we struggle with it. We recently received a clothes catalogue through the post, and

by the time we had finished with it we had circled 800 pounds worth of clothes we didn't need but suddenly found we wanted. And not being able to afford them breeds discontent. And that is covetousness.

And yet here's the problem, at least for us here in Switzerland, and that is that God has prospered us. By any measure, and any standard, in comparison to the rest of the world, he has filled our laps with wealth and it is running over. And that is true of the poorest student to the richest executive among us. And it includes your pastor.

The question is, what are we supposed to do with that wealth? Well, Jesus tells this parable of the rich fool to answer exactly that.

**The wrong response to prosperity**

V16: 'And he told them a parable, saying, "the land of a rich man produced plentifully.' Now this man is already rich, and his estate has just produced a bumper harvest. And what's important to see is that there is no sense here that this guy has grown rich through cheating or immorality. He hasn't used forced labour, or dodged his taxes or done dodgy deals. This guy's worked hard, he's organized his workers and the land has produced plentifully. God has blessed this man with even more. He's already rich, and God, in his grace, has chosen to prosper him some more.

But what is that additional prosperity for? How is he supposed to use it? Is it for himself? Well, he thinks so: v17-19: And he thought to himself, 'What shall I do now, 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.'

He thinks this is all about him. Five times he uses the word 'my': my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods and my soul. He's earned it, and he deserves it, doesn't he? At least, that how the expression goes. 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, note again, that 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 having taken care of the storage problem, he relaxes to a life of leisure and self-indulgence. He is looking to the future, but it is one that is entirely self-centred. 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 than reclining with a gin and tonic. He thinks he is only responsible for himself.

Now, what does God think of that? Frankly, what God thinks of it should shock us to the core. V20: But God said to him, 'Fool!'

Now, when you reach the end of your days, what do you want to hear God say to you? You want to hear the word, 'friend' don't you? You want to hear the commendation, 'well done, good and faithful servant', don't you? None of us want to hear 'fool'. That would be a terrible thing to hear God say to you, wouldn't it? And yet, if we use our increase, our surplus, our prosperity and our wealth to get more stuff, and build bigger barns, what will he say to us?

V20 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 planning and living came crashing down around him. As Earle Ellis says in his commentary on Luke, 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. Not only was his wealth not his own, his life wasn't either. And church, neither is ours.

And this man who was looking forward to relaxing and sitting down, finds himself standing before the judgment seat, where only one Person ever sits. And his pursuit of possessions and his full barns and had left him standing empty before God. That, if you'll excuse the pun, is a grave error.

But why is he a fool? Why, when all he did was what so many of us do, is he a fool?

Firstly, he was a fool 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, he was a fool because he allowed his wealth to seduce him to complacency. Sure he looked to the future, sure he had ample goods laid up for many years, but he still wasn't looking far enough ahead. He was looking at retirement but not beyond that, when all the time his soul was going to be required of him that night. And, like the rich fool, to think this life is what really matters, and to live like this is all that matters, is just short-sighted.

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

God calls such a man a fool, Jesus says, and then, v21: '*So is the one* who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.' If we have a similar attitude to the prosperity God gives us, Jesus says, we are no better than this fool.

So, if we shouldn't simply increase our spending as God prospers us, what should we do?

**The right response to prosperity**

Well, Jesus tells us what we should do in v21: rather than lay up treasure for ourselves, we should be rich toward God. But what does that mean? Does it mean that we need somehow to make God rich? But how can that be, when the foundation of this parable is that it was God who made the man rich, and when we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are his, and there is nothing that he lacks. So what does Jesus mean: be rich toward God?

Well, I think he answers that in v33, "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy." Instead of using our God given wealth to accumulate more stuff, and make our lives more comfortable, we are to use it to alleviate suffering, by giving to the needy. So Jesus' criticism is not against wealth creation but against the use of that wealth for ourselves alone. Rather, God blessed this rich man, and he blesses you and me, with prosperity above and beyond our needs, so we might give it away to the needy.

God prospers us so that in giving our money away, Bibles might be translated, and missions funded and the gospel preached and the starving fed and the naked clothed and the poor educated. And just looking at our own drop-in-an-ocean-of-need efforts towards missions here at Westlake, He prospers us so that Burma might be reached and orphans in South Africa fed and the nations served by Medair. As John Piper has written: 'God is not glorified when we keep for ourselves (no matter how thankfully) what we ought to be using to alleviate the misery of unevangelised and uneducated and unhoused and unfed millions.' But he is glorified, when we joyfully give it away; when, as Alcorn says, we choose a modest lifestyle and then give away 100% of what we receive above that. As John Wesley said, 'earn as much as you can and give as much as you can'.

And just imagine what resources could be released for the kingdom, over generations, if we got a vision for that kind of living and giving and taught it and modeled it to our kids?

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 are free to give it away?

Firstly, by looking to eternity. The rich fool thought it was all his, and looked no further than his retirement. The wise man knows it's all God's and looks beyond retirement to the day when his soul will be required of him. And it's by living with eternity in view and understanding that any treasure we have down here is just coloured counters to be exchanged for real, heavenly treasure in eternity, that we can break free of covetousness.

And secondly, it is by getting your treasure right. Jesus says in v34 'For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' And God has prospered us so that, by giving it away, we can show that He and not our prosperity, is our God, that He and not possessions is our treasure. Being rich toward God means looking to Him as our wealth and our riches. It means having him as our security and comfort and joy and treasure. And we can give away earthly treasure because we

have received heavenly treasure in Christ. We can give it away because we have discovered what is of infinitely greater value than stuff.

In v32-33 Jesus says, "Fear not, little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. [So] sell your possessions and give to the needy.' The kingdom, the inestimable value of the kingdom, is His free gift to you. You can't earn it and you certainly can't buy it by giving. It's his gracious gift to you, and when your realize that and what he has done for you, that Christ became poor to make you rich, then you'll give, because He's your treasure, not money.

In 2 Cor 9:6-7 in an extended passage on giving, 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.' But then he immediately follows it up in v8 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.' 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 and his giving to transform our hearts, it opens our hands. And the result, Paul says, is sufficiency, enough, for us and abounding generosity and good works toward others.

So, the danger of wealth is covetousness. The wrong way to handle it is to think it's given so that we can have more. The right way to handle it is to live with eternity in view, to know Christ as our treasure and allow his grace to change hearts and open hands in generous, joyful giving to the needy.