

Sunday 1st August 2021 – Luke 12:13-21 ‘The Parable of the Rich Fool’

John D. Rockefeller was at one time the world’s richest man. He was once asked: ‘How much money is enough?’ His poignant reply was: ‘Just a little bit more.’

Rockefeller’s short but commendably honest answer goes to the heart of our famous story today. I’d love to have seen the look on Rockefeller’s face when he gave that answer: was there a sense of purpose and determination? Or perhaps a wistful weariness, a resignation you might say to the truth which Jesus lays bare in this pithy tale, which is that **money has a powerful effect on our souls**.

And although Jesus makes the point more powerfully than probably any other teacher in history, what Jesus says here is not unique. The Romans – contemporaries of Jesus – had a proverb which said that money was like sea-water: the more a person drank, the thirstier they became. Greed has been a universal temptation throughout history, and it’s not confined to the super-wealthy either.

Many years ago I remember a good friend being deeply worried about his father, who was still working full-time in his mid-70s, despite poor health. I asked why he hadn’t retired, and he told me that, in his mid 60s, his father had invested a quarter of a million pounds in a property deal which had backfired, and the negative equity and mortgage repayments meant that if his father retired his parents would be bankrupt. His father had to keep working until the market recovered: ten years later, he was still slogging into the office, retirement on hold and health failing.

It was a sobering tale, with a heavy human cost – but it also illustrates exactly the warning that Jesus gives here. Why does someone of retirement age who is already financially secure, with a mortgage paid off and a quarter of a million in the bank, go all in for one last deal? If your barn is big enough, why do we still desire a bigger one?

And I don’t believe any of us sit above these kinds of desires. Our whole system in the West is essentially based upon the sanctification of greed, harnessing its power to drive growth and prosperity. But it’s not as if the alternative is better: the reason communism has largely failed is that those in power couldn’t live by the principle of equality and instead feathered their own nests: we simply replaced one greedy elite with another, in a system which worked much less well than the one it was supposed to replace. Greed is a universal temptation, and the levers of greed – particularly money – exercise a power in our lives if we give them even the slightest opportunity to do so.

‘Watch out!’ Jesus says. ‘Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.’

And so he tells this simple story to illustrate the point. A rich man is blessed with another great harvest and decides to hoard it – indeed, to do so he even has to build a bigger storage facility. But he doesn’t live long enough to take life easy, feasting on the luxury he has accumulated.

What’s disturbing about the story is that until the sting in the tale when God appears in verse 20, the story could be most of us in modern-day Britain. This kind of success, accumulation of wealth and preparation for a life of ease in our golden years is what we spend our lives aiming for. It is uncomfortable even to read the title of the story, ‘The Rich Fool’ – is that us? Even worse to hear God addressing this icon of the Western dream directly: ‘You fool!’

So what does this story have to say to us today? The great biblical commentator William Barclay describes the failings of the man in the story in two ways: **first, he never saw beyond himself**. As Barclay puts it: ‘The rich fool was aggressively self-centred. There is too much ego in his cosmos.’ One detail that is often overlooked is that the man’s wealth was derived from a harvest. Now, whilst good farming practices can significantly contribute to the ultimate output, any farmer knows that the weather is all-important. Or to put it another way, the rich fool’s wealth is not just all down to him, his hard work and his gifts. *God had blessed him* with good weather which yielded a good harvest. His success was not all his own.

And yet, there was no gratitude, nor any generosity. He had more than he needed, but decided to keep it all for himself anyway. His greed led him to pride as well as self-indulgence.

It also blinded him to a bigger reality, which is Barclay’s second observation: **he never saw beyond this world**. He lived as if this life was all there is. Had he ever thought about meeting his Maker he might have been inclined to share, to offer his surplus for the benefit of the community. Jesus in numerous places draws a contrast between accumulating treasures on earth, or treasures in heaven, a theme we’ll return to next week. This man chose only the pleasures and treasures of earth, a strategy which was ultimately bound to fail – and not only because he met a sudden end, but also because grain does not last for decades. He was, like the foolish builder, constructing on sand.

So what is the anti-dote to the power of greed, to the grip of money in our lives? We’ll explore the foundational theme of God’s trustworthiness and provision next week. Today, though, we’ll put the focus on two practical ways we can guard our hearts, both of which we referenced briefly earlier.

The first is to cultivate gratitude – to be thankful. It’s so easy to credit ourselves entirely for our success. And of course, if we’ve worked hard and lived wisely, we can find satisfaction in the success that brings. But it’s not all about us. If you’ve been able to work hard for decades, give thanks for the health that has enabled you to do so, the talents you’ve been given, perhaps the unexpected opportunities that came your way that helped you to succeed. It’s *never* all about you. The man in the story says the word ‘I’ six times in one short paragraph – if we’re to live free of the addictive power of accumulating money we have to stay humble, and thankful.

Second, be generous. One of the biggest scandals in our society – and it’s not just an incredibly powerful illustration of the truth of what Jesus is saying, but let’s call it what it is, a great social evil – is that, proportionately, the rich give away less than the poor. Not in absolute terms – but in relative terms, the wealthiest in our society give away a *smaller* proportion of their money than those on below-average earnings. What do you think God makes of that? And it’s not just the whole of society, it’s true even in the church. The Church of England did a comparison of relative giving just 5 years ago and people in the Diocese of Sheffield – whose average income is half that of church members in the Diocese of Oxford – actually give a higher proportion of their income to their local church than people in our diocese (Oxford).

The kingdom of God turns this world upside down. Money still has the power to get a hold of our hearts. But the good news is that Jesus has the answer. Be thankful, be generous – avoid the temptation to build a barn you don’t need. A person’s life does not consist in the abundance of their possessions, but in the abundant life and love of God. Amen.