

## **Luke 12:13-21**

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'

Then he said, 'I will do this: 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.' 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?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."\*

## **Signs of the Times: What is Wealth?** - July 31, 2022

*Luke 12:13-21*

One of the latest trends among the billionaire set is having a private yacht. Apparently, boat makers are having a hard time keeping up with the demand. It's not enough to have a private jet, or a private island, they need private yachts to get there in style. Of course!

Showing off, naturally, is nothing new for the super rich. I mean Europe, especially Great Britain, is dotted with castles and stately homes containing hundreds of rooms and extensive grounds. Hundreds of years ago, when you were rich, you built one of these palaces and called it—without irony—a country house, to tell the world you had it made. Fancy houses continue to be the standard status symbol. In recent years, the term “McMansion” has come into fashion. You've heard of McMansions? Right? They're those super-ugly, super huge 5000 sq. ft. plus homes of questionable architectural taste. There's even a blog called “McMansion Hell” that spotlights some of the more egregious examples.

No commentary on excessive billionaire spending would be complete without mentioning those who have built their own private spaceships, charging passengers millions of dollars for a ten minute trip so they can see for themselves the earth is indeed round. Now, if someone offered me a trip in Elon Musk's spaceship, I wouldn't refuse! But obviously there are a lot of people with a lot of money to spend!

So we come to this story Jesus tells about a wealthy farmer. At first glance His point is rather obvious. A rich farmer had a bumper crop and didn't have enough room to store everything. So he decides to tear down his existing barns and build bigger ones. Then, he thinks, he'll be set for years to come. Unfortunately for him, as soon as he finished building the barns, he suddenly died. One of the takeaways from the story is clearly not to place our confidence in wealth and possessions because our life situations can change instantly and money and things just won't matter.

We continue today with our series “Signs of the Times” and wealth is our topic. Having defined social justice, and established a means to make ethical decisions in previous weeks, we discussed what it is that makes us human beings. From a biblical standpoint, humans are those created by God who are capable of understanding that they are created and are therefore not gods. With the knowledge that we are stewards of God's creation, we should act accordingly.

And the problem, of course, is that we don't. As we begin working through the myriad of social justice issues we face, I'm starting with wealth because having or not having money and possessions affects just about everything else. Whether it is climate change or racism or war, wealth and money ties them all together.

Ok, sure sure, we shouldn't get too rich. End of message. Right?

Only in part, friends, only in part. Let's dive deeper.

There is no question that we all need money and possessions. Money lubricates human society. Without money, we can't obtain the food we need to eat, the clothes we need to wear, the shelters to protect us from the elements, the medical care we need to keep us healthy.

Nothing is free of charge in this world. Those who claim to be living without money or possessions are only able to do so because someone else is paying for all they have. They just don't "own" things. I will even say that love has a price. Let's face it, there is a profound difference between caring for and loving people who can't care for themselves because of age, illness, or other conditions, and caring for and loving persons who are quite capable of working and making money for themselves. It's much harder to love someone who is sponging off of you rather than making their own way in this world, isn't it?

I get this question all time: Should I give money to people who come up to me on the streets? I'll be honest with you, I get very mixed feelings when an able-bodied individual asks me for spare change when I'm coming out of ShopRite which has a "help wanted" sign on the door! Yes, I know I can't look inside someone's head. I don't know if they are mentally or physically able to work. I don't know if they are just suddenly down on their luck because someone robbed them or they have decided that begging for a living is a perfectly fine occupation.

I helped manage a feeding program in Atlantic City nearly 20 years ago. We fed sometimes 400 people daily. I know that thirty percent were mentally ill and twenty percent lost everything in a casino and were trying to arrange to get out. However, a full fifty percent of the people we fed had jobs but were not making enough money to pay for rent or medicine or some other necessity.

So, yes, I weigh all these factors when I am approached for help and I feel guilty if I don't help. But I also feel bad sometimes when I do help, thinking I just enabled someone to beg instead of work.

Yet if dealing with genuine beggars demonstrates a lack of wealth in our society, what constitutes sufficient wealth or even excess wealth? In other words, if I am fed, clothed, sheltered, and healthy, should I be content?

Many people in southern Africa, where I lived for ten years, eat a thick porridge called *bogobe* which reminds me of polenta. It is usually accompanied by some sort of greens. For protein, many seldom have meat daily, but there are generally eggs, as well as a small fish called *kapenta*. These foods are enough to keep people alive and provide them with enough nutrition to work. Everyone is clothed. In fact, many people wear used clothing shipped over in huge bundles from developed economies. For

housing, many live in concrete block shelters with tin roofs. In Zambia there is a network of government clinics and hospitals. There are schools. There are hundreds of minivans for transportation. In other words, for many people in a developing nation like Zambia, many, not all, the basics for living are indeed present, but just barely. Is that enough?

Take our lives in the United States. Many of us live in homes or apartments that have electricity, shingled roofs and insulated walls. We may own quite a few articles of clothing and shoes. Most have coats of various kinds. Most of us have access to an automobile. There is public education of varying quality. Most employers provide some form of health insurance. Most people have enough income that they can go to restaurants, take occasional trips or vacations, and do other things to entertain themselves. Is that enough?

Yet, we come to the top tier of society — top tier, at least, in terms of having money and possessions. All of us know of neighborhoods where there are clusters of McMansions. There are areas, like Moorestown near where I live, where there are homes that cost over \$10-million. There are people who have huge closets full of clothing and shoes — items they might have worn once if at all. There are people who have restaurant food delivered daily via GrubHub, drive Teslas and BMWs and Mercedes Benzes. They vacation in Colorado in winter and Europe in the summer. Their children attend exclusive private schools and elite Ivy League colleges. I expect the farmer in Jesus' story would feel quite comfortable with these people. Is that enough?

How much is enough? Let us recall our Old Testament scripture from one of the least appreciated books of the Bible — Ecclesiastes: Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.... What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Traditionally, the author of the book of Ecclesiastes is said to be King Solomon, the richest, most powerful king Israel ever had. Of all people, he was certainly at the top of the elite. He had the power. He had the money. He had a great palace to live in. He had 1000 wives — not sure that was a good idea. Yet, here is this exemplar of the wealth of humanity declaring “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” In other words, to Solomon, having wealth, power, fame, and possessions is completely useless. All that working gets you is stress and pain. Isn't this as true today as it was 3000 years ago?

So we come to the question what is wealth? One of the most fascinating things researchers have learned about how humans share their wealth and possessions is that the most generous people on earth are not the super-rich or the middle class folks like us. No, the most generous people on earth are those who have very little wealth or possessions. Over and over again it has been demonstrated

that people with little money and few material possessions are more willing to share them with others than those who have more. Yes, in dollar value what poorer people have is not a lot. But as a portion of what they have, poorer people share more of what they have. They give to the beggars, they will give up that extra shirt or pair of shoes. I watched churches in Africa with mostly poorer members: everyone gave what they could and more.

Friends, Jesus gave us the answer to the question of how much is enough when he taught us the Lord's Prayer. What did Jesus tell us to ask God for? Jesus taught, "Give us this day our daily bread." That's all. Not to give us a week's or month's or year's worth of bread. Just enough for the day's needs. The point? Trust God to provide for tomorrow, next week, next year, and all the years to come. Remember first, last, and always, God is the source of all we have and will have. God will provide.

The rich farmer thought he was creating his own wealth and setting himself up for years to come and that is a fundamental mistake humans make in life. We get so consumed with getting wealth and possessions that when we do succeed in getting wealth, we mistakenly believe that we are solely responsible for obtaining what we have. Friends, can we learn, will we learn, that yes, our work and toil are partly related to the abundance of our wealth and possessions, but much, much, so much more is entirely out of our control. The many things which we do not control, we can attribute to God and understanding that God works in our lives, even if we don't always grasp what's going on.

Now just perhaps life is nothing but a random chance, a roll of the dice. If understanding life boils down to being part of God's deliberate plan or simply being caught up in random chance, I prefer looking for and seeing the hand of God in how my life unfolds. When I consider the pathway of my life, I have felt God at work.

So all this leads to one final point of answering the question of "What is Wealth?" We tend to think of wealth mostly in terms of having money or possessions. We can accuse the super-rich of not sharing their wealth as they should. We might even question how we deal with our own wealth, as limited as it may be.

Yet, have you considered that wealth is not just money and possessions? While such things are obvious signs of wealth, we all can be wealthy in other ways.

Every person has talents and abilities. Some of us are blessed to be wealthy in terms of our skills. There are expert craftspeople: builders, carpenters, plumbers. There are artists of all kinds: writers, painters, musicians. There are people who are wealthy in their ability to care for others: parents, health aids, doctors and nurses. We have teachers, scientists, lawyers, and so many more people who are wealthy in terms of their abilities to educate, research, and insure justice. Yes, I agree that people wealthy in talents and abilities may not necessarily be compensated with money but they are

wealthy nonetheless. They are wealthy in that they have — you have — an abundance of talent to share with the world.

Friends, we may not be rich farmers with so many crops that we can't store all the grain. That man could have done many things with his excess wealth, but chose to keep it for himself. But I guarantee that everyone in this room is gifted in ways that most others do not have. We may take some perverse satisfaction from the person who has everything, shares nothing, and dies the next day. But if we have talents and abilities we are not using to our full capabilities, are we much different from the rich farmer who misused his gifts?

Let's take some time to redefine our understanding of wealth. We may not have a lot of money, but God has blessed us all with something we can share with the world. Let's discover our inner wealth and use it!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.