

Bible Study Guide: Week of 7-25-2022

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Luke 12:13-21

¹³Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And 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.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But 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?’ ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

¹³Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

The request from the member of the crowd would have been a typical issue posed to a rabbi or expert in the law. Deuteronomy 21:15-17 lays out expectations of inheritance in situations involving more than one male heir. The oldest son was entitled to a double portion of the inheritance; that is, twice as much as any other sons. This child received one portion for being a son and another portion in order to assume the role as leading patriarch of the family unit. The brother who asks Jesus to intervene on his behalf here is a younger son who is asking Jesus to tell his older brother to distribute the parents’ wealth more equitably. One of two things is happening here. Either the older brother has kept the entirety of the inheritance for himself and is, therefore, violating the law or the older brother is distributing the inheritance according to the law and the younger brother is not satisfied with his portion. The latter seems more likely here. After all, if the older brother was shirking his duty the younger son could have taken his older brother to court and won easily given the stipulations in Deuteronomy 21. Instead, it seems more likely that the younger brother is merely after more than his fair share and expects Jesus to intervene on his behalf, given Jesus’ concern throughout the gospel for the poor and marginalized. Yet Jesus, as we see, refuses to engage this man on the terms he wishes. Ironically, Jesus (the judge of all the living and the dead) claims no standing to arbitrate between these brothers.

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Jesus turns this one man’s request into a learning opportunity for the entire crowd. His framing of the issue in terms of the dangers of greed further underscores that the younger brother was likely unsatisfied with his allotted share and simply wanted more. Jesus’ warning in verse 15b rings more true today than it did when it was first uttered: “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Most aspects of our modern world are geared toward teaching us the opposite. The world teaches us that we are worth only the sum of our possessions and that ultimate joy is to be found in the next great acquisition. Jesus’ message here was counter-cultural then; it is more so today.

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barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But 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?’

This famous parable, the parable of the rich fool, is very brief, but extremely rich and evocative. Notice a couple of things. First, notice that the rich man is only partly responsible for his fortunate position. His land produced abundantly. Yes, that likely involved work on his part, but it also involved a certain amount of good fortune. How quick the man is to claim for himself that which is not all his own handiwork! Also notice the isolation of the man. Other than God, he is the only character in this parable. Notice the pronouns:

And *he* thought to *himself*, ‘What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?’ ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And *I* will say to *my* soul, ‘Soul, *you* have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’

The only 2nd and 3rd person pronouns (you, he, and himself) refer to the rich man. The tragedy of this parable is not just that the man builds barns he will never have a chance to use, but that when he dies unexpectedly he will have no mourners and no heirs. His gluttony and greed have isolated him from all other people.

²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Jesus concludes the parable with this verse of summary which, along with verse 15, perfectly encapsulates his teaching. He points out that the selfishness and greed he has warned against in verse 15 can isolate people from one another. This warning seems particularly pertinent to the man who approached Jesus for a better share of inheritance. His greedy desire for more, Jesus knows, may isolate him from his loved ones. Being rich toward God also entails generosity toward others. Keep in mind the tandem commandments to love God and love one’s neighbor as oneself. Also, note 1 John 4:20-21:

²⁰ Those who say, “I love God,” and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Have you ever felt like the brother who approaches Jesus, feeling you aren’t getting your fair share? How do you think Jesus would respond?**
- 2. What could the rich man have done differently to give the parable a different outcome?**
- 3. What do you think Jesus means by being “rich toward God?” How are we to do this?**