


Spring 1997

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Recommended Citation

Stacy, R. Wayne, "Luke 12:13-21 : The Parable of the Rich Fool" (1997). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 321.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/321

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Luke 12:13-21: The Parable of the Rich Fool

R. Wayne Stacy¹

There's an old, old, old story, widely traveled, about a hermit who stumbled onto a cave in which was hidden an enormous treasure. The hermit, being old and wise, realized what he had discovered and immediately took to his heels and ran from the cave as fast as he could. But as he was running, he came upon three brigands who stopped him and inquired as to what he was fleeing.

"I'm fleeing the Devil!" he said.

Curious, they said, "Show us."

Protesting all the way, he took them to the cave where he had found the treasure.

"Here," said the hermit, "is death which was running after me."

Well, the three thought the old man was touched and sent him on his way. Gleefully reveling in their new-found treasure, they determined that one of them should be dispatched to bring back provisions, lest they leave their treasure to others. One volunteered, thinking to himself that while in town he would poison the food and kill his rivals and have the treasure all to himself. But while he was away, the other two were thinking as well! They decided to kill their comrade when he returned and divide the spoils between them. This they did and settled down to eat their food and celebrate their successful cabal. But their banquet turned out to be a funeral feast, because when the poison hit their stomachs, they too expired, leaving the treasure as they had found it.²

That's one of the oldest stories of greed we have. It lurks in caves; it deals in death; it does not deliver on its promises.

And Jesus says, "Beware of greed!" He said it to the disciples on the way to Jerusalem and to the cross that awaited Him there. Luke says that Jesus had "set His face" to go to Jerusalem (9:51). You can be sure that it was not to pay a social call. The phrase, "set his face," with which Luke begins his long, largely original travel narrative of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem (9:51-18:14), echoes the prophet Ezekiel of whom it was said eleven times that he "set his face" as a symbolic act of resolve and determination to pronounce God's judgment upon an unrepentant and disobedient Jerusalem.³

And so, in Luke's story it is in the context of this "crunch time," with high anxiety all around, that Jesus pauses to teach His followers what it means to be a disciple (Luke 12:1-53). His teaching focuses chiefly on three areas: persecution (12:1-12), possessions (12:13-34), and the parousia (12:35-48).⁴ In this setting,

Jesus warns them, many issues will arise—conflicts with other religious groups, anxiety about life’s necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter, and even family disputes.

Two brothers come to Jesus with a dispute over the family inheritance: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me, would you?” (12:13). The probate lawyers start sweating: “Uh oh! Sounds like a messy one!” It doesn’t get any more “down and dirty” than this.

It was an honest question, and it was appropriate to put the question to Jesus. In first-century Palestine, Israel understood itself as a theocracy, and so there was no distinction, as in contemporary jurisprudence, between “canon law” and “civil law.” The “law of the land” was the Scripture, and its adjudication was the responsibility of Scripture scholars usually called “rabbis” or “teachers of the law.” And so, haggling over the furniture and the dishes and the silverware, they come to Jesus: “Teacher, make him give me my share.”

What is interesting to me is that Jesus refuses to settle the dispute between the two brothers: “Man, who made *me* (italics mine) judge or arbiter between you?” (v. 14). Jesus’ refusal to settle the dispute is interesting because He consistently shows no reticence about claiming authority as an interpreter of the Scriptures, at times even placing His own views *over* those of the Scriptures: “You have heard it said in the Scriptures . . . but *I say unto you!*” Further, Jesus demonstrates consistent interest in and concern for social justice, especially for the poor and the disenfranchised—widows, orphans, the diseased, the crippled, the marginalized. Why then does he demur in this matter?

Well, I don’t know, really. But I think it may have something to do with the way the issue was presented to Him. The brother in Luke 12:13 is not a poor, disaffected person whose cause Jesus can step up to champion. The dispute is about money, not persons, and Jesus seems to have very little interest in money *per se*. Jesus’ belief in the Kingdom of God and the radical reorientation of life it brings was so central to his teaching that he regards disputes over furniture and dishes and silverware as irrelevant. And so he refuses to answer *this* question about who should get the lion’s share of the inheritance. Instead, he answers a question the brothers asked but didn’t *know* they had asked. Jesus raises the stakes and says: “Beware of all forms of greed; for your life doesn’t consist in the prodigality of your possessions!” (v. 15). And to make sure they get the point, Jesus tells them a story, sometimes called a “parable,” about a rich man who played the fool.

Those who like to rummage around in the dusty stacks of libraries will have run across this story or one very much like it before. A version of the moral lesson taught in Luke, chapter 12, appears in the writings of the Roman moralist Seneca:

All the greatest blessings are a source of anxiety, and at no time is fortune less wisely trusted than when it is best; to maintain prosperity there is need of other prosperity, and in behalf of the prayers that have turned out well we must make still other prayers. For everything that comes to us from chance is

unstable, and the higher it rises, the more liable it is to fall. Moreover, what is doomed to perish brings pleasure to no one; very wretched, therefore, and not merely short, must the life of those be who work hard to gain what they must work harder to keep. By great toil they attain what they wish, and with anxiety hold what they have attained; meanwhile they take no account of time that will never more return.⁵

A striking parallel to the story in Luke occurs in the pseudepigraphical document known as *The Book of Enoch* which probably predates Jesus' story!

Woe unto you who gain silver and gold by unjust means;
you will then say, "We have grown rich and accumulated goods,
we have acquired everything that we have desired.
So now let us do whatever we like;
for we have gathered silver,
we have filled our treasures [with money] like water,
And many are the laborers in our houses.
Your lies flow like water.
For your wealth shall not endure
but it shall take off from you quickly
for you have acquired it all unjustly,
and you shall be given over to a great curse."⁶

And another close parallel appears in the Apocryphal document known as *The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach*:

There is a man who is rich through his diligence and self-denial,
and this is the reward allotted to him:
when he says, "I have found rest,
and now I shall enjoy my goods!"
he does not know how much time will pass
until he leaves them to others
and dies.⁷

And the theme is found in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 39:6 and Ecclesiastes 2:18-19 warn the wealthy that all their "stuff" will be left to others to argue over at their deaths. It seems the idea that wealth can seduce us to embrace a false sense of security only to be thwarted in the end by "the great equalizer," death, was widely traveled, both in the Greek and Jewish worlds. The Arabs said it this way: "There are no pockets in a shroud." We would say it differently: "You can't take it with you," or "There are no U-Hauls behind hearses."

It used to bother me that parallels to many stories in my Bible could be found elsewhere. It was part of my reverence for the Bible that the ideas and tones in my Bible should be found *only* in my Bible, and it disturbed me if I ran into them

in other places. Then it occurred to me that the reason stories like the one in Luke, chapter 12, occur in every culture is that the *issues* occurs in every culture. In every generation the problem of wealth and how to relate to it arises—the “haves” and the “have nots.”

Luke’s version of the story is a rather simple one, actually. A rich man lives like there is no tomorrow, only to learn, to his embarrassment, there really isn’t! Simple enough. Or is it?

In Luke 12:16-21, Jesus does not simply tell the same old story about a rich man who, greedy for gain, died leaving behind great wealth for others to argue over. The moral of Jesus’ story is *not* “you can’t take it with you.” We didn’t need Jesus to tell us that. His point is more sobering.

The key to Jesus’ meaning is found in verse 20. Most translations render it similarly to that of the RSV: “Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you’ve prepared, whose will they be?” But that’s *not* exactly what the Greek says: Verse 20 in Greek reads: *eipen de autō ho theos, Aphrōn, tautē tē nukti tēn psuchēn sou apaitousin ap sou. Ha de hētoimasas, tini estai?*⁸ The subject of the sentence is “they,” implied but not explicitly stated, in the verb *apaitousin* (“they are demanding”). The subject is *not tēn psuchēn sou* (your “soul” or “life”; the Greek word *psuchē* can mean either) as usually translated. Indeed, it cannot be; *tēn psuchēn sou* is in the wrong case to be the subject of the sentence. The subject is clearly “they.” What Jesus actually said was: “*They* are demanding your very life from you.” And the question is: Who is “they?” In the context, the answer is, of course, the *things* – all the “stuff” the rich man had been so concerned about that he had built bigger barns to hold it all. And so, you could translate verse 20: “Fool! This night *they* shall require your very life from you; now who owns whom?”

And so Jesus’ version of this well-traveled story does not serve the same truism that most versions do; namely, “you can’t take it with you.” In Jesus’ story the rich man doesn’t die! He lives! For Jesus, the worst thing about putting all your “stock” in stuff is *not* that you might die before you can enjoy it, but that you might *live* to regret it! His point is that all the “stuff” the rich man thought *he* owned actually *owns* him! Look how it dominates his life. He’s launched a demolition and construction program to support it all. He has to lie awake at night terrified that someone might slip in and steal his stuff. What do you want to bet he’s called to check on the cost of a security system? He doesn’t own the “stuff;” it owns *him!*

Ironic, isn’t it? One of the reasons we pursue wealth is for *independence*. What do we call it? “Independently wealthy.” Hear that? This man is wealthy all right, but he’s anything but “independent!”

No, Jesus’ story isn’t about greed. Oh, it starts out being about greed, and greed clearly precipitated the issue. But the issue Jesus is concerned with is more basic than that. Notice, in the narrative the story about the rich man functions as an illustration of the proverb, and the proverb is about the true nature of *life*, not about greed. You could translate it: “And he spoke to them this proverb, ‘Watch and be on guard against every form of greed, for one’s life does not consist in

what he owns.' And to illustrate that truth, he told them this story: 'the land of a certain rich man produced bountifully'" No. This story's not about greed; it's about life, and specifically, what secures it.

Jesus' point is hauntingly clear: you were not made to "run on" wealth; you were made to "run on" God. *He* is the "fuel" on which you were designed to run. Try to "run your life" on anything else and you'll "break down" every time. Indeed, at its deepest level that's what "sin" really is—the ill-fated and self-destructive attempt to secure the self apart from God. It will never work. Indeed, it cannot, because you and I were not simply made *by* God, we were made *for* God. There is no life apart from relationship with him. To reject our absolute dependence on God in the search for security and freedom and independence is to cut the cord that supplies our very lives. To find our security in *anything* other than God is not salvation, it is damnation; it is not freedom, it is slavery of the profoundest sort.

Can you imagine Shakespeare's character, Hamlet, stopping in the middle of Shakespeare's great play and saying: "All right, all right, Will. I get the idea. I'll take it from here. I don't need you to write lines for me anymore?" Would Hamlet have thereby discovered his "true selfhood?" Of course not! That would not be Hamlet's "salvation," it would be his "destruction." For Hamlet only exists in the mind and fertile imagination of his creator, William Shakespeare, and to find his identity outside of that relationship is self-destruction.

Hear Jesus: You were made for God! He "thought you up" like a character in a play. There is no life, there is no security outside of that life-giving relationship with God.

In the Old Testament we call that "covenant." In the New Testament we call it "gospel." Call it what you will, but whatever you call it, it's a "wake-up call." What I mean is that nothing—not wealth, not power, not position, nothing. *Nothing* can supply you with what you really seek. Only God can do that. Because what you want, what you really want at the deepest level of your being, whether you know it or not, is God.

Jesus is here giving us "stage direction" for life. "Your life does not consist in the abundance of things. To seek security in things is to play the fool, and so are those who lay up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God. Because what you *really* want, things can never satisfy!"

Now, a lot of people don't *know* that's what they really want. It's kind of like standing before an open refrigerator at midnight: "Well, I'm hungry but I don't know what I want." There are a lot of people that way. You observe their lives and you think they just have everything. But you listen to them talk: "I think that may be my problem; I have every-*thing*."

I am not suggesting that everybody is walking around every waking moment conscious of some deep, gnawing, longing for God. A visitor walks into a strange church. The usher hands him a bulletin and says piously: "We know you're here because you're looking for God." The visitor thinks, however, "Well, no. I just had an hour to kill and thought I'd stop in." I'm not naive enough to think that people are obsessed with some overwhelming hunger for God.

But I know this. I've stood by the bedside of many people when the surgeon comes into the room to deliver the news and with lowered voice and heavy brow says: "I'm sorry; we did every thing we could." And never once have I seen anyone, upon hearing that news, get on the phone and call their broker. Never!

What you want, what you *really* want, "stuff" can never deliver. "Beware of greed!" Jesus says, not so much because wealth is bad as it is a fraud.

Shel Silverstein has written a haunting little poem called "The Search." It goes like this:

I went to find the pot of gold
That's waiting where the rainbow ends.
I searched and searched and searched and searched
And searched and searched, and then—
There it was, deep in the grass,
Under an old and twisty bough,
It's mine, it's mine, it's mine at last . . .
What do I search for now?⁹

When the question is "life," the answer is "God." There is a hunger only *He* can satisfy. It is, says C. S. Lewis, "our inconsolable secret."¹⁰

When I was about six years old, I was very sick with asthma. I had difficulty breathing at night and starting losing weight. My parents, alarmed, took me to see our family physician who tried a number of different types of medications to control the asthma, but none of them worked. Finally, he suggested to my parents that I be taken to the hospital in West Palm Beach about forty miles away where extensive tests could be run and a more thorough diagnosis made. I had never been in the hospital in my life and the prospect terrified me. To make matters worse, because the hospital was so far away from where we lived, and because there were five other children at home that my parents had to take care of, I knew that I would be left there most of the time by myself. I had never spent a night away from home, and I was sure that I was being punished for some heinous misdeed.

I begged my parents not to take me. I cried for a solid week before the day came for me to go. The day before I was to go to the hospital, I couldn't eat anything. I didn't sleep at all that night. I just lay in bed hoping morning would never come. When it finally did, I was close to panic. My father was looking for anything to console me, and so he told me that I could take my favorite toy with me to the hospital. It was a fire truck I had gotten for Christmas. It was fire engine red and had a working extension ladder, a fire hose that really would shoot a stream of water, and a working light and siren that were powered by four large "D" batteries. I had lusted after that fire truck all year, as only a six year old can, and finally at Christmas there it was under the tree. My, how I loved that truck! I slept with it at night.

Well, the fire truck got me into the car and to the hospital, but when my Dad left me, I cried again. The nurses were nice. They took me to the play room in the

pediatric ward and tried to make me as comfortable as possible, but it didn't work. All I could think of was that I wanted to go *home*.

Finally, finally, with all the tests completed, the doctors came in late one afternoon and said I could go home tomorrow. Again, I didn't sleep at all that night. I spent most of the morning looking out of the window for my father's car. I lay in the bed listening for familiar footsteps, a familiar voice.

Finally, Dad came. I was never so glad to see anyone in my life! My father has a big, booming bass voice, and as I heard him walking down the hospital corridor to my room talking with the nurse, he sounded like God!

We got in the car and started for home, and instantly I started breathing better. I turned to Dad and said: "You know, Daddy, I feel *much* better now. I think I'm cured. It's a miracle!"

Dad laughed, and then he noticed that I didn't have my fire truck with me. He said: "Well, son, did you leave your fire truck at the hospital?" Can you imagine? I hadn't even missed it! In my haste to leave, I had left it in the play room at the hospital.

I said: "I guess I did."

"Well, I know it's your favorite. I'll turn around and we'll go back for it."

Suddenly, I didn't feel so good anymore. My breathing became rapid and constricted. I thought quickly and said: "That's all right, Dad. I was getting tired of it anyway. I'll just leave it for the other kids to play with."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I wanna go *home*."

Now, why did I do that? That was my very favorite toy! Why would I do that? I can't think of anything I wanted more than that fire truck.

Well...maybe one.

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² Idries Shah, *World Tales: The Extraordinary Coincidence of Stories Told in All Times, in All Places* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 76.

³ Cf. Ezekiel 6:2; 13:17; 14:8; 15:7; 20:46; 21:2; 25:2; 28:21; 29:2; 35:2; 38:2. The last five texts refer to various foreign nations which also come under the judgment of God along with Israel. But the first six passages fall in the section of Ezekiel usually identified as the oracles of warning (chps. 1-24), dated sometime prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. in which the prophet "sets his face" to confront Jerusalem with the fact of its demise as God's righteous judgment upon the city for its disobedience.

Luke clearly wants to cast Jesus in the role of a "New Ezekiel" and the "prophet-martyr" who confronts the people of God with their sin and who, consequently, pays with his life for his faithfulness. Note that this section on the nature of authentic discipleship (12:1-13:35), concludes with Jesus' lament (13:31-35) over a Jerusalem which rejects its prophet-messiah. Of Jerusalem Jesus says: "Nevertheless, I must go my way . . . for it is not appropriate for a prophet to die outside Jerusalem."

⁴ Cf. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Commentary* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 140.

⁵Lucius Annaeus Seneca, "On the Shortness of Life," *Moral Essays*, 17:4-5, Book II, Loeb Classical Library, rpt., trans. J. W. Basore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 343-44.

⁶I Enoch 97:8-10, cited in *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament*, ed. M. Eugene Boring, Klaus Berger, and Carsten Colpe (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 215.

⁷Sirach 11:18-19.

⁸Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd corrected ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1983). Though there is a textual variant at verse 20, it does not involve the *subject* of the verb. The only question at stake among the variant readings is whether or not the verb is the typical verb for "asking" (*apaitousin*) or the stronger, compound verb "demanding" (*aitousin*). In either case, however, the subject is still "they," implied in the verb. The external evidence seems to argue for the compound verb; cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 160.

⁹*Where the Sidewalk Ends* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 166.

¹⁰"The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 15.