

January 24, 2021

How is Life Measured?

Luke 12:13-34

What's the burning question on your mind right now? Maybe it's some BIG question like: what kind of future will there be for my children/grandchildren? Or "How do we deal with growing polarization – politically, religiously, culturally – in society?" Or maybe it's something intensely personal, like, "How can I find a job?" or "What's going to happen with my health?" or "When am I going to get a Covid vaccine shot?" (or "Should I get a Covid shot?").

Many of Jesus' parables are told in response to particular questions. Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan in response to the BIG question, "*Who is my neighbour?*"

In today's reading, He's dealing with an intensely personal question. Someone calls from the crowd, "*Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father's estate with me*" (12:13). In Jewish law, the rules for dividing an estate were well established. The oldest son got 2/3, including all the land (so the farm would be large enough to be sustainable). The other sons divided the remaining 1/3 (in cash or produce) between them. Jesus does not see himself as a judge in a civil suit. He does see into the man's heart: "*Beware!*" Jesus says, "*Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own*" (12:15).

Immediately, Jesus tells a story. It's a story about a farmer. A very successful farmer. He's too successful. His barns aren't big enough to store all the grain his fields have produced. It's a good problem to have, but it's still a problem. He has options:

1. He could sell the grain immediately – but chances are other farmers also had good crops so he wouldn't get top denarius.
2. He could give the excess away to the poor – and there were always lots of poor.
3. He could plough the extra harvest under – as fertilizer for the next crop.
4. He could store it all – hoping for prices to rise as time goes on. This is risky – between weather, rodents, rot, and marauders, and incurring the expense for bigger barns, not selling or acting immediately may or may not be a good investment decision.

The man chooses the fourth option. It's a reasonable choice. Jesus does not pass judgment on his choice to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. What Jesus does highlight is the **thought process** behind the man's decision. He's selfish. He's greedy. "*Then I'll sit back and say to myself, 'My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!'*" (12:19). Remember the context: Jesus is saying this to a man who wants more money, a bigger inheritance. "*Guard against every kind of greed,*" Jesus has just said, "*Life is not measured by how much you own.*"

Only once does God speak directly in Jesus' parables. Here. God says, "*You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?*" Jesus concludes, "*This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God*" or "*A person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God*" (12:21).

What is Jesus saying?

What is Jesus NOT saying? Jesus is NOT saying that being successful is wrong. Jesus is NOT speaking about wise or unwise grain storage practices. Jesus is NOT saying that wealthy people will die young.

Jesus IS asking us to think about what "success" and "wealth" in life really look like.

For the man who called out to Jesus and the farmer in Jesus' parable success and wealth mean having as big a slice of the pie – property, money, and the "easy life" – eating, drinking, and being merry – as possible. Look through the farmer's thoughts/words: it's all about **ME**: *"What shall I do since I have no place ... This is what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns ... I will store all my grain and my goods. I'll sit back and I'll enjoy my good life ..."*

Then he makes plans for **HIS** life with no thought for anyone besides himself – no family, no friends, no community, no compassion, no care ... Other people? Not in the picture.

The farmer has no sense of anything but the here and now, either. It's all about immediate physical pleasure: eating, drinking, and being merry. Apparently, he is confident, this will just go on *"for many years."* His own mortality? Not in the picture. God? Not in the picture.

Remember the parable of the soil we looked at on January 3 (Matthew 13)? One of the soils Jesus talks about is soil where the seeds fell among thorns that grow up and choke out the tender plants: *"The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced"* (Matthew 13:22). This is exactly who this farmer is. God is crowded out by the worries of this life (too much grain) and the lure of wealth.

For Jesus, success and wealth are measured in terms of being "rich toward God" or having a "rich relationship with God" (12:21). If we read on in Luke 12, Jesus goes on to elaborate:

"Therefore," Jesus says, *"I tell you not to worry about everyday life – whether you have enough food to eat or enough clothes to wear. For life is more than food, and your body more than clothing. Look at the ravens. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for God feeds them. And you are far more valuable to him than any birds! Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And if worry can't accomplish a little thing like that, what's the use of worrying over bigger things?"*

"Look at the lilies and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for flowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?"

"And don't be concerned about what to eat and what to drink. Don't worry about such things. These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers all over the world, but your Father already knows your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give

you everything you need.

"Sell your possessions and give to those in need. This will store up treasure for you in heaven! And the purses of heaven never get old or develop holes. Your treasure will be safe; no thief can steal it and no moth can destroy it. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be."(12:22-34).

Being Rich toward God

If we want to be "rich toward God" or have a "rich relationship with God," then we have to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength, AND love our neighbour as ourselves.

Being rich toward God means loving God. God doesn't figure in the worldview or plans of either the man in the crowd or the farmer. It's all about getting their own stuff. It's about securing their own financial independence. God? Well, He's not in the frame at all.

But Jesus reminds us that God is very much part of our lives, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Why did the farmer have such bountiful crops? Because God provided good soil, good seed, just enough rain, and plenty of sunshine. Why do we enjoy the blessings we do in life? Because God provides for us, as well. True, we may not have all we WANT, but God provides what we need. A focus on the "*worries of this life and the lure of wealth*" can make us miserable. A focus on gratitude and thanksgiving can make us joyful.

Jesus encourages us to keep things in perspective. "*Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need.*" What might that look like in my life? For me, it means reminding myself – as often as I can – that God is with me. When I'm reading the Bible, Jesus is with me, wanting to speak to me. When I'm praying, God is with me, talking with me. When I'm reading the news, God is with me, helping me process it in wise ways. When I'm speaking, God is with me – asking me to think about what I'm about to say and maybe not say it. When I'm working, God is with me, I can "*Work ... as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people*" (Colossians 3:23).

Being rich toward God means remembering our neighbours. If the farmer's barns were too small to hold his crops, there were those whom he could have blessed with the excess. In the ancient world – like today – there were always poor people, especially widows, single moms, the lame and crippled, lepers, and many more. As Jesus is speaking here, He is not asking people to go without. He is not asking them to skip a meal. He is simply being asking them to be a good neighbour, to be a good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

Remember the good Samaritan? A good neighbour is simply someone who feels compassion. And who does something about it. Who needs our compassion? What will we do about it?

Being rich toward God means keeping life in perspective. The farmer says, "*I'll sit back and say to myself, 'My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!'*" But ... that very night he dies. Ouch.

I recently ran across a quote by Dr. Terry Grossman, who describes himself as “*a thought-leader in anti-aging and preventive medicine and the founder of Grossman Wellness Center, a cutting-edge clinic which works to extend the longevity and quality of its patient’s lives*” (in Denver). He writes, “*As an official member of the baby boomer generation, I do not believe it was intended for us to die. We were special right from the get-go; dying wasn’t part of the script.*” It’s a nice sentiment, but perhaps not the most realistic approach to life ...

On the same page, I read this insight: “*Surveyed baby boomers were asked when they believe old age begins. The most common answer was 85 – three years after the average American can expect to be dead and buried*” (Kay Horowitz).

In January, one doctor wrote, “*Ten months into the pandemic, I turned 51 and did the math: I’m entering the final third of my life. I know that sounds grim, and I am hoping to get more time than that, but I often do these mental calculations because the clock of life inspires me to make the most of the years that remain. That constant tick-tock reminds me to fill the final decades with invigorating experiences to bank in my inner black box – a delightful cache of memories to replay over and over in my mind like a favourite movie.*”

What really matters? For me, it is my relationship with God. That gives my life meaning and purpose. And it is my family, friends, and those to whom I can be a good neighbour – even complete strangers. Those are the invigorating experiences that really matter.

Being rich toward God means remembering that we are who we are, not what we have. At the end of the day, people aren’t eulogized for how much they got in inheritance from their father, how bountiful their crops were, or how big their barns were. We’re not remembered for our homes, our cars, or our how much we ate, drank, and were merry.

A recent news report noted that by noon on January 4, the average CEO in Canada had earned the same amount as the average worker does in a year. The average CEO’s annual salary is almost \$11 million. At the end of the day, who cares? As a dear saint in my church in Edmonton quipped, “*You don’t see any hearses pulling U-Hauls, now do you?*”

How is life measured? We are remembered for who we are. We are remembered as people who did (or did not) love God and lived our faith. We are remembered as people who did (or did not) have compassion for others, who were good neighbours. We are remembered as people who did (or did not) have our lives in perspective: who were rich toward God and our fellow human beings. We are remembered for our character. We are remembered for our relationships. We are remembered for our love. We are remembered for our compassion. We are remembered for our integrity, for our humour, for our kindness, for our generosity.

How is life measured? What does it really mean to be rich? What do we really want to be remembered for? That’s what Jesus is asking us. How are we going to answer the question?