

Luke 12:13-21 Teaching about wealth

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

¹⁴ Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" ¹⁵ Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

²¹ "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

The reading from Luke clearly faces questions of wealth, possessions and materialism head on. The thrust of the passage is this — whilst teaching, a man asks Jesus to arbitrate on an inheritance dispute. Jesus not only refuses, but then teaches about a landowner who builds ever bigger storehouses. The landowner has put wealth ahead of his relationship with God or with others.

Why doesn't Jesus back up the man in dispute? The one person in all the world who had a *right* to judge and he wouldn't!

The issue here is that the 'fairness' of the situation is not as important as the *relationship*. The stuff has been placed ahead of connection. They need to repair their relationship, then the inheritance will be shared with grace. Deciding one way or the other wouldn't do that.

The story of the rich man building bigger barns isn't a parable at all. It is what happens. Consistently, wealth entices people to collect more wealth, to control that wealth, and control others through it — holding stock to manipulate the price. Building bigger barns isn't just about protecting his investment, it's more exploitative. By such means the rich get richer, and the poor poorer, and the relationship worsens.

After refusing to arbitrate, Jesus warns his listeners against greed, or covetousness — just wanting more and more. I think envy is a deep driver of desire. For example — I am a guitar player. I have a classical guitar, and an acoustic guitar and an electric! But guitar players do like to have more guitars... I'd like a Les Paul, a Stratocaster, or perhaps a Paul Reed Smith, and then a nicer classical guitar would be great, too! And hidden within the desirability of those guitars is that Jimmy Page played a Les Paul, and Hendrix a Strat, and Alex Lifeson a Paul Reed Smith, and having that guitar would make me more like these rock stars!

I'm deliberately conscious of these sort of desires and I search for the motivations within myself, striving to reason with them. Covetousness frequently has imitation behind it.

In Jesus's day wealth was (wrongly) seen as God's blessing on a morally upright character. Despite the best efforts of Old Testament books like Job that view persisted. Jesus's teaching isn't that wealth is wrong, but he disrupts the simple correlation between wealth and blessing — the unconscious bias we hold towards financial success. Jesus demands we look at character more than wealth — admire those with integrity and generosity as well as other qualities. Ultimately, followers of Christ imitate Christ — and he gave himself completely on the cross — and is not recorded as owning anything more than the clothes he stood up in. This is very challenging!

Psalm 37:4 has this wisdom — 'Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.'

The wisdom of the internet says: 'If you can't find joy in a simple cup of coffee, you won't find it in a yacht.'

Deliberate thanksgiving and generosity are the 'vitamins' we need to keep our relationships with God and our neighbours healthy. But even then there are times when you may covet a new guitar!

Blessings, Tim.