

## Me, Myself & I

Luke 12:13-21

I have an idea that there are a lot of people out there who share my preference for Luke's gospel over the other three. It's the stories, I think. Luke tells the gospel in a way that captures our imagination better than the others. His stories are more engaging, and there is a warmth to them that Mark, Matthew and John seem to lack.

And that's why the harshness of some of Luke's parables always catches me by surprise. It seems out of character. This is one of those parables. A man has come to Jesus, not for help with his prayer life, or to have some terrible disease healed, but to see if Jesus won't make his brother share his inheritance with him. And I guess that what Jesus does is, instead of taking the guy's head off for his mind-numbingly obtuse question, he makes his point through a rather a harsh story about another man, a farmer.

In Luke's last parable, the Good Samaritan, there was a good guy and some bad guys. Only a bad guy in this one, and he's so bad that God himself comes down on him pretty hard. But before we go completely off on him, too, it's important to note what the rich farmer was **not** guilty of. First, greed. He didn't set out to make all that 'money,' in fact; he actually seemed surprised by it. The other thing he wasn't guilty of was wickedness. Everything he made, he made honestly, by the sweat of his brow.

What he **is** guilty of, God boldly tells him, is being a fool. He thinks that the harvest he has stockpiled, the money he will eventually stockpile, is going to make him happy – that now he can kick back and eat, drink and be merry; retire young, travel, play golf, live the good life.

Those days are long gone for us, of course. A decade ago people were building bigger and bigger silos to store up their riches so they could retire at 45 or 50 and play for the next 30 or 40 years. They weren't only set for life; they were set for a fat and sassy life. Now-a-days, though, we are just trying to hang on to enough money so it won't run out when we are 75 and have to go back to work greeting shoppers at Wal Mart.

The farmer was saving for the good life. We are saving out of fear.

I am sad to say that the gap between us and the foolish farmer isn't as comfortably deep or wide as we would like to think it is, though. We can all claim, I trust, that wickedness does not run in our veins, and that greed is not the driving force in our attitudes about money, at least not in a Wall-Street-greed sort of way. For most of us, any and all thoughts of a luxury retirement have gone down the drain.

But the rich farmer was guilty of one other thing, something that you and I are guilty of as well: being forgetful.

The first thing he forgot is that it all came from God. There's a reason Jesus chose to tell the story of a rich, but foolish **farmer**. Those of you who keep a garden or grew up farming know that there are good years and bad years. Shoot, anyone who has a lawn knows that right now.

You can do everything right, you can plant the same things in the same exact way that you did the year before, even the same way your daddy did the generation before, and you can still have a terrible year or a fantastic year, because not everything is in your hands. That farmer couldn't control the weather. He couldn't prevent locusts or weevils or any other vermin from devouring his crop. All he could do was the best he could do, and the rest of it was out of his hands and in God's alone. And for some reason God made it produce – in abundance; hand over fist. That farm was a cash cow, but it was God who made it that way

That's one of those things I'm not sure we can hear often enough – that any 'success' we meet with in life is God-given. Yes, we can work hard. Yes, we can and should learn our 'trade' to the very best of our ability, whether it's raising children or selling houses, or growing corn or leading a church. But in the end, God is the one who gets credit for any and all accomplishment we meet with. Kids who grow into wonderful adults. A successful business. A vital church. A productive garden. It doesn't always turn out that way. There are just as many people out there who have done everything right and things still fall apart around them. If our efforts are met with success, and we need to remember to be surprised and grateful for it.

The second thing the rich but foolish farmer forgot is that there is such a thing as too much. There's a show on The History Channel called American Pickers. Cameras follow the two hosts as they drive around the country 'picking,' or hunting for treasures in other people's junk. And it's amazing to me what they find – not just that they find amazing old treasures buried in among the rolls of old carpet and rusty refrigerators, but that people have all that stuff to begin with. Barns that are filled to the rafters with junk. Warehouses that are loaded to the gills with stuff, old and new. Junk piles that stretch out over acres and acres.

They have too much, clearly. And so do we.

Now, if I could read your mind I would probably see a fight brewing in there. You are probably thinking, *but I can barely pay the bills! Where does she get off saying that I have too much?!* For some of you here, that is the honest truth. You are making it, but just barely. But there are a lot of us out there who are having trouble paying the bills because we have padded our lives way past the point of 'enough.' We have crossed way over into the territory of surplus, and maybe even gone so far as to pitch our tents in the land of wild extravagance. Do we have more than our friends do? No, probably not. Do we have more than we need, more than our daily bread? No question.

And if you are anything like me, who spent all last week lusting after my brother's iPhone and iPad and Macbook, you think, as much as you already have, it just isn't enough.

So what's the big deal? Why should I have to settle for *enough* if I make enough money that I could afford what might look to Jesus or some meddlesome preacher like *too much* if I want to? I haven't gone in debt for it. My kids still have shoes on their feet and money to go to college. Why shouldn't I be allowed to accumulate wealth and gadgets and gewgaws if I want to and if I can? Why shouldn't I be able to reward myself for my hard work? I might be living within my means just barely, but I am living within my means.

I think Jesus would tell us that whether or not we can afford it isn't the issue. It's whether or not it's good for us. It isn't that there is virtue in living with enough, and only enough. It's just that having too much will do the very thing to you that you were trying to avoid by getting all that stuff to begin with: it will make you miserable. Isn't that what you thought all that stuff would do for you? Make you happy? Give you security? Bring you joy? That's what the farmer thought, and that's why God called him a fool. His fat, full silos were just going to steal that from him. He would be rich in things, but poor in God, and as you and I should surely know by now, God is the only one who can bring us happiness and security and joy. The only joy that lasts beyond the grave.

So what to do with all that extra stuff? Luke's farmer wasn't the first one to have to ask that question. Remember Joseph in the Old Testament? He had that same predicament, didn't he? Seven years of bounty coming out of the fields of all of Egypt's farmers. And he told them to do the very same thing that this fool farmer did – store it away. Stockpile it. Build bigger silos to hold it all. But not for the same reason. Not so they could keep it for themselves and make themselves rich off of it. It was so that they could feed themselves and their hungry neighbors when the seven years of bust came along. That was why God gave them all those resources for to begin with. To take care of their neighbor. To look after the poor. Daily bread for everyone.

Look back at the words of this foolish farmer – they tell the whole story, don't they? Look at the pronouns he uses. *What should I do? Where will I store my crops? I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years so relax.* He's talking to himself like there's no one else in the universe. It's only him, and it's all his. That's what too much does to you. It makes your world very small; there's only you. You can't see anyone else. Jesus will tell another rather scathing parable soon about a rich man who was so blinded by his wealth that he never even saw poor, starving, scabby Lazarus, slowly dying down the end of his driveway.

The other thing you can see in his words is that the poor fellow's windfall isn't a joy to him, a surprise. It's a burden. It's turned him into a nervous wreck wondering how he's going to hang on to it all, and sure enough, in the very next paragraph Jesus will tell his disciples that having too much stuff just keeps us in a constant state of anxiety. It makes us forget that it is God who provides for us. If God provides, there is enough. If we provide, there will never be enough.

The man who came to Jesus was right, technically. Jewish law did state that his brother should have given him about a third of their father's inheritance. It was rightfully, legally his. But already, even before he got his hands on it, it had gotten its hold on him and was dragging him down. The truly sad part of the story is that he had the greatest treasure in all the world standing right in front of him, the one thing that his soul really wanted, the one thing that could provide him the security and joy he longed for, and he walked away from it.

May God protect us from making that same mistake.