

WEEK 4: THE RICH FOOL

Luke 12:13–21



The Place of the Passage

Luke 13:22 reminds us that Jesus is still “journeying toward Jerusalem” and therefore toward his death and resurrection. From this point through 17:11 (where we read a third and final description of Jesus’ progress toward Jerusalem) Jesus continues to reshape our vision of God and of a God-honoring life. He does so by calling his hearers to embrace the “inside-out” priorities of God’s kingdom, to commit to the radical demands of discipleship, and to repent, especially of an idolatrous love of wealth.

The Big Picture

Throughout the Gospel of Luke Jesus warns about the dangers of wealth, perhaps no more strongly and surprisingly than in his parable of the rich fool.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Luke 12:13–21. Then think through and write your own notes on the following questions. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on page 1982; online at www.esv.org.)

When your parents or oldest living relatives die, who in your family will receive the inheritance? How might our practice today differ from the typical inheritance laws¹ of Jesus' day?

Review what happens before the parable, in Luke 12:13–15. Does "someone" from "the crowd" ask Jesus a question, as most people who approach Jesus do, or does that person command Jesus to act?

In Jesus' second response to the man (Luke 12:15), what does he detect to be this man's root sin? Turn to Exodus 20:17. How does the Bible define this sin? Of the three parts of the tenth commandment—related to one's neighbor's house, spouse, and workforce—with which part do you struggle the most?

When Jesus offers the reason why one should not covet ("one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions"; Luke 12:15), he reminds us that

"the abundance of . . . possessions" is not essential to our *survival* (we can live without a lot!); it does not necessarily lead to *happiness* (often the opposite); and it offers *no protection* against sickness, sorrows, calamities, or death. That said, why do we find Jesus' teaching here so hard to believe?

How many times does the rich man speak about himself—using the words "I," "he," "himself," and "my"? What is Jesus emphasizing?

In Deuteronomy 8:18 Moses admonishes, "You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is *he who gives you power to get wealth.*" Do you think that way about your wealth? Why or why not? Does the rich man thank God for his success? Read Romans 1:18–21. According to Paul, how serious is the sin of ingratitude?

This rich man expresses no thought of God. Nor does he express any thought of *others* or offer any help to *others*. Instead, his focus is on himself. "Soul," he says to himself, "you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry" (Luke 12:19). Read Luke 12:32–34; 18:22. What does Jesus think about such behavior?

Read Acts 2:45. Have you ever sold any of your possessions and given the money from the sale directly to someone in need? How would **such** a regular practice offer an antidote to coveting, which Paul labels “idolatry”² (Col. 3:5)?

How is the rich man presumptuous? What has he not taken into account? How is his attitude different from what is taught in James 4:13–16?

In Deuteronomy 8, Moses offers a warning regarding the time when God will bring Israel “into a good land,” a land in which they “will eat bread without scarcity” and will “be full” (Deut. 8:7–10). What key word is repeated most in the verses that follow (vv. 11–19)? Why?

As Jesus concludes his thought-provoking parable, he issues a final admonition: “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). If the main application of the parable of the rich fool is to be “rich toward God” (v. 21), what does that look like? Answers are provided in the immediate context—Jesus’ teaching in verses 22–34. How do we apply these answers?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

JESUS BECAME POOR. In one of the most remarkable statements about Jesus in the Bible Paul writes, “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus’ *poverty* was his incarnation. The eternal and ever-glorious Son of God was born of a woman who was not wealthy, and he was raised in a small and obscure village. More than that, he lived a humble life of dependence on both his heavenly Father and his earthly friends and followers. Then, through his sacrificial sufferings and death, he gave everything away. Such sacrifice (his extreme poverty!) bestows the riches of God’s salvation upon all who trust in him.

LIGHT OF THE WORLD. After the parable of the rich fool, Jesus teaches that one of the ways in which we can be “rich toward God” (Luke 12:21) includes seeking his kingdom (v. 31), or the spread of the reign of Christ on earth, and that one of the ways in which we can do this is by sharing our God-given provisions with others: “Sell your possessions, and give to the needy” (v. 33). Neither here nor anywhere else in the New Testament are Christians instructed (as some have claimed) to “preach the gospel at all times, and use words if necessary.” Words are always necessary! The gospel cannot be preached without the proclamation of who Jesus is and what he has done. That said, both here in Luke 12 and elsewhere it is clear that declaration and demonstration of the gospel go hand in hand (see Matt 5:1–16; 1 Peter 2:9–12; 3:1). People are often won to Christ when our works match our words.

Whole-Bible Connections

DECEITFULNESS OF RICHES. Back in the garden, Adam and Eve had everything they needed but were cast out because they chose to eat from the one tree that was off-limits. From that point on, the desire for more has plagued God’s people. Throughout Israel’s history, the test set before God’s people was whether they would be content with the good gifts and boundaries given by God, or would seek fulfillment elsewhere. In the New Testament, Jesus warns about the deceitfulness of riches (Matt. 6:24; 13:22) and the futility of greed (19:22–24; Luke 12:16–20). Moreover, he admonishes us to be “rich toward God” (Luke 12:21),

to seek first his kingdom (12:31), and to trust and thank God for his provision (Matt. 6:19–33). Following Jesus (1 Tim. 6:3), Paul speaks of the damnable dangers of the love of money (v. 10) and of the uncertainty of riches, and he charges wealthy Christians to “set their hopes . . . on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (v. 17).

THE SON OF MAN. In Psalm 8:4, “son of man” is a designation for humanity as a whole, given dominion over the earth at creation. In Daniel 7:13–14 the “son of man” is a glorious figure to whom God gives an “everlasting dominion” and who (like God) is to be honored and served by “all peoples.” Jesus’ use of the title (his favorite self-designation) is therefore a claim to be a divine-human mediator who exercises dominion faithfully over all things—even death (Heb. 2:6–9). The Son of Man exercises this dominion through his suffering (Luke 17:25; 18:31–33), his exaltation (Acts 7:56; Rev. 1:13), and his future return to judge the earth (Luke 17:24, 30; 18:8; Rev. 14:14).

Theological Soundings

JESUS THE JUDGE. Jesus’ question “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” (see Luke 12:14) is dripping with irony,³ for we know that one day this man and all people “must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10), which is also called the “great white throne” (Rev. 20:11). In fact, Jesus teaches in Matthew 25:31–32 that “when the Son of Man comes in glory . . . then he will sit on his glorious throne,” and “before him will be gathered all the nations” to be judged. Some will receive the sentence of “eternal punishment” and others the reward of “eternal life” (25:46); some will hear, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41; compare 7:23), while others will hear, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v. 34), along with the words “Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master” (v. 21).

LOVE OF MONEY. Money promises security and pleasure, but those who love money will never have enough to be satisfied (Eccles. 5:10). Jesus teaches plainly, “You cannot serve God and money” (Luke 16:13). Moreover, as Paul teaches, riches are fleeting and uncertain (1 Tim. 6:7, 17), and clamoring after them will bring not satisfaction but sorrow and ultimate “ruin and destruction” (vv. 9–10). The solution, however, is not asceticism or vows of poverty. Rather, we should be content with what we have and should bank our hopes on God, who will abundantly provide (vv. 8, 17). All of God’s people—especially the rich—must recognize God as the giver of all good things (James 1:17). They must use their God-given financial means to be generous to others and thus “store up treasure” for the life to come (1 Tim. 6:19; Matt. 6:20).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Luke 12:13–21 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the *Personal Implications* for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) the passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Luke 12:13–21

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Jesus' parables. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight or underline these to review again in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Inheritance laws** – In Jesus' day, typically the oldest son would receive his father's land and twice the inheritance that his younger brother(s) would receive. This was because he was to provide for his father's household, which might include his father's widow, other children (unmarried daughters), servants, and animals.

² **Idolatry** – In the Bible, idolatry usually refers to the worship of a physical object. Paul's comments in Colossians 3:5, however, indicate that idolatry can include covetousness, which is essentially equivalent to worshipping material things.

³ **Irony** – A literary device by which an author, for rhetorical effect, expresses something using language that normally signifies the opposite of his intended meaning.