

“Set on Things above”

Luke 12:13-21 ¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴ But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵ And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." ¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷ And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸ Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' ²⁰ But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

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There truly is nothing like a good estate dispute to show a family's true colors. I think you all know what I'm talking about. It is a strong family that is not destroyed by the greed bogey that arises whenever a will is read. Certainly, we can understand Jesus' apparent reluctance to get involved in this man's case and then more or less calling the man greedy with the parable he told. But...unfortunately for you folks you are going to have to settle in and listen while I tell you that this passage isn't about a petty will dispute, but rather it is a passage that can and will cut right to the core of our beliefs about wealth and why we accumulate it.

The first thing I need to point out about this passage is that the man wasn't coming to Jesus to get him involved in a petty will dispute. He came asking Jesus to get his brother to be fair to him according to Kingdom of God values rather than what the law said was fair. We all know about how people can use the law to their own advantage even when it is in conflict with any standard of morality. This becomes particularly evident at tax time. There are tax laws that benefit the wealthy simply because they are wealthy while people who really need a break are taxed at a disadvantage.

This man came to Jesus to ask him to make a judgment. In that day people came to Rabbi's and wise men to ask them to make judgments in disputes. But, in this case I can't help but believe that this man was one of Jesus' followers and he was asking Jesus to enact his Kingdom of God rights for him. He was coming to Jesus the Messiah and asking him to do what Jesus the Messiah had said he had come to do. One of the first things that Jesus had to say about himself in Luke's Gospel was "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The "year of the Lord's favor" is otherwise known as the year of Jubilee. In ancient Israel every forty-nine years the land was supposed to be redistributed equally among the people according to the original family allotments decreed in the Book of Exodus. Jubilee was the only way this man could get possession of

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land that in all moral fairness was his but this man's brother was withholding this man's share from him and using the Law to his own benefit to do it. Dt. 21:15-17 states that the firstborn son to man who has two wives can get a double portion of the inheritance. In a family with only two sons this double portion would be the whole thing. This man needed a declaration of the Jubilee to get his inheritance.

In response to the man request Jesus sets out to show him that life is not found in wealth of possessions but in being rich towards God. Jesus asks the man, “Who appointed me judge or arbitrator over you?” Well, if Jesus is the Messiah, then the obvious answer to that question is, “God did”. That being the case we must ask ourselves; “Would God want his Messiah to arbitrate an estate dispute tainted by greed or would God want his Messiah to make a judgment about human greed and how we look at wealth and possessions?”

In the parable that follows Jesus demonstrates that when wealth and possessions are one's life's pursuit rather than God and seeking to do his will, we are without a doubt putting ourselves in the place of God. Jesus is pointing out to this man that his desire to have his share of the family inheritance, though he had right to it, was only him sinning the sin of playing God. This becomes obvious when you notice his request of Jesus was not a request, but a command. He said, “Teacher, *tell* my brother.” “Command my brother.” This man was telling, not asking. So, Jesus, the Teacher, helps him to see the error of his ways with a parable about a rich fool who considered himself to be a god unto himself.

The first place the rich fool's false godhood shows up is his relationship to the land. He had a great land perhaps maybe even a kingdom and that particular year the land brought forth a really good crop. Though the land is the producer, the rich fool calls them his own. This sounds very much like us and our belief that we are entitled to the private ownership of land and that what *my* land produces belongs to *me* or *I* can do what *I* want with *my* stuff. When we take this attitude of ownership over the means of our sustenance and well-being, we put ourselves in the place of God.

We as Christians must take to heart that all that we have is not our own but rather is entrusted to us by God. We who say we trust and are faithful to God the Father Almighty Maker of Heaven and Earth and to Jesus Christ his Son must be very wary of how we buy into this culture of greed. We are simply servants entrusted with a great estate, God's estate. When by God's grace that estate produces generously, we cannot consider the surplus to be our own and tuck it away somewhere so that if we don't use it we can pass it on to whomever we choose. Consider the rich fool, to be rich toward God he should have shared the surplus with the people of the land. He never considered that maybe God had a use for that surplus some where on the estate.

The next thing this rich man does is speak to his soul and direct it to be happy as if his soul were his own. Soul in the Bible is not this immortal blip of energy that departs us when we die. That's Greek paganism. The soul is the entirety of our existence as relational persons created by God to be in relationship with him, with others, and the Creation. At death the soul ceases to exist unless God in his free choice by grace chooses to keep it alive until the

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resurrection. In the Bible, an immortal soul living forever in heaven is not our end. Resurrection into a new creation is. Our existence as persons, our soul, is a gift from God. We do not tell ourselves how to be fulfilled. We do not kickback on a delusion of self-determinism, that devil of “I did it my way”-ness that plaques our culture, we do not kickback on that and tell ourselves at the level of our very existences “relax, eat, drink, be merry. I myself had made it so that you have nothing to worry about.” Like a rich fool, we could die tonight and be called before the God who gave us life and commanded to give account for it. We do not go before God and say “I was your faithful servant. I did it my way. Look at my wealth.” That is ludicrous. We go there saying, “I did it your way. I was as good a steward of your estate as I could be. Look at how I shared and distributed your wealth to those who needed it.” Our culture is so screwed up in its ingrained, indeed, inbred belief, that being faithful to God means being good, working hard, and growing wealthy. Our souls, our lives are not our own. We belong to God.

Paul says precisely this in Colossians. If we belong to Christ Jesus, if we are indwelt by the Spirit of God, then we are to set our hearts and minds on things above where Christ Jesus’ reign is in effect; the reign of compassion, of justice, of kindness, of faithfulness, of humility, of patience, of self control; a reign that is discovered in the community of faith, in prayer and Bible reading and study, and in obedience and faithfulness. We who are made alive in Christ are dead to this world and its ever pervading greed. Beware of greed. It has very subtle ways. Our existence is not found in possessions but in the life giving Holy Spirit of God. Our calling is not to be good, successful people who grow wealthy. It is to put to death all our forms of idolatry, especially greed which is the desire to possess and call things, even other people, *my own*.

Put on the new self. The one that God himself is renewing by the working of the Holy Spirit in and among us to be more in the image of Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit leads us into a relationship with Jesus and through our getting to know him and sharing in his love for the Father and the Father’s love for him and us, the Holy Spirit changes us. This knowledge grows as we love and serve one another, as we worship and pray alone and with one another, as we read and study the Bible alone and with one another. Without these things we are Christians who are ironically dead in the water for without them we do not know who we are trying to be faithful to and how we are to be faithful. Without these things we are simply left to the deludedness of ourselves trying to act like God. Christians be set on things above. It is there you will find life for you have died and your life is hidden indeed with Christ in God. Amen.