

Title: Life Towards God
Text: Luke 12:13-21
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I don't think you are every too old to enjoy a good cartoon, right? The title of that delightful little clip is 'Gone Nutty'. Scrat, the fictional little prehistoric squirrel, is obsessed with finding and hoarding acorn nuts. He has an elaborate storage system brimming to the full with acorns. He has been wildly successful, that is until he tries to squeeze one more acorn in.

'Gone Nutty' is a wonderful parallel to a story Jesus tells in the gospel of Luke, which we will get to in just a moment. In the story, Jesus addresses our propensity to 'go nutty' over storing up possessions, often at the same time sacrificing our relationships with each other and certainly with God.

In the New Testament, Jesus talked a lot about money. I mean - a lot. He said that it was hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God; he spoke of being choked by life's riches and pleasures and even proclaimed a 'woe' – a type of curse – over those who were rich.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.
(Matthew 6:24)

Jesus knew that wealth – can be a wonderful servant, but is a demonic master. Money and wealth makes for a wonderful idol – something we worship in place of God. Of idolatry, CS Lewis said:

History is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.
(CS Lewis)

We easily fall for the trap of believing that if we have more money, a bigger house, a stronger investment portfolio or a healthier superannuation account – more nuts - then we will be happy.

Recent research suggests the exact opposite is actually true.

Last year the Boston Globe summarized university research on how wealth affects us. This is what it said:

Wealth can actually change how we think and behave—and not for the better. Rich people have a harder time connecting with others, showing less empathy to the extent of dehumanizing those who are different from them. They are less charitable and generous. They are less likely to help someone in trouble. And they are more likely to defend an unfair status quo...Money, in other words, changes who you are.

Researchers found that even the mere suggestion of getting more money—a technique known as "priming"—makes people less friendly, less sensitive to others, and more likely to support statements like "some groups of people are simply inferior to others."

It's all a bit scary, and could lead us to the dangerous conclusion that money is inherently evil, when it isn't. The New Testament says that money is necessary to ensure we don't become a burden to others and so that we grow in the grace of generosity. One of the most common misquotes from the bible is when people say, 'Money is the root of all kinds of evil.' What Paul actually says to Timothy is this:

The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.
(1 Timothy 6:10)

Money is inanimate. Money has no life, no soul. Money – wealth - has no power of its own; *only the power we give to it*. Money gives birth to evil when it captivates and captures our heart; when we worship it rather than God. James MacDonald puts it this way:

It's not wrong to have things - it's wrong when things have you.
(James MacDonald)

It's with this in mind that we turn to the setting of a parable of Jesus from the 12th chapter of Luke: Let's read:

Someone in the crowd said to (Jesus), "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?"
(Luke 12:13-14)

It was common in Jesus' day for Rabbis like Jesus to adjudicate in disputes between parties – to render judgments in legal cases. In this case it seems that two brothers are fighting over their father's estate. There seems to be no will. In such cases, the estate was normally allocated to the older brother, who then following custom, would divide it and give an equal share to his brother. That was how things were done. But that wasn't being done here, and so the younger brother comes to Jesus full of righteous indignation demanding justice.

The younger brother is not so much seeking Jesus to mediate, as he is attempting to enlist Jesus to his cause. He wants Jesus to be his big gun in a family war; his blunt instrument to extract justice.

But Jesus refuses to play the game. He refuses to be drawn in. The Message version translates his response as:

'Mister, what makes you think it's any of my business...'

Jesus knows that if he passed judgment on the dispute, most likely this would lead to a tragic and permanent fracture in the relationship between the two brothers. But Jesus is not a divider; he is a reconciler.

This is a sadly familiar story. A dispute over money was threatening to tear a family apart for ever. The brothers were elevating money as more important than their relationship. As one commentator puts it:

Jesus was insisting there was a greater gain than getting an inheritance and a greater loss than losing it.
(D.G. Miller)

Jesus was never one to let a teaching opportunity pass, and so rather than offering judgment between them; he pronounces judgment over them in the form of a parable:

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."

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

"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. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."'

"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?'

"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."
(Luke 12:15-21)

The parable is bracketed by two warnings, to be on your guard against greed and to be rich towards God, which we will look at later.

Jesus begins the parable by saying there was a 'certain rich man'. The man begins the story rich and just gets richer, as his ground produces an abundant harvest. Right here in the first sentence is a fundamental theological truth; it is not the rich man who produces an abundant harvest. It is the ground that brings it forth. Jesus is making a point we should be careful to hear; everything we enjoy materially is a gift from a God who gives graciously.

Not many of us are farmers here this morning, but the same principal applies to every one of us.

The ground that produces materially in my life are the gifts and abilities God alone has given me to steward.

The ground that produces in my life are the opportunities I have as a citizen of one of the richest nations on earth and through history.

The ground that produces in your life may be a family inheritance, or God-given business acumen or strategic opportunities at just the right time.

It doesn't matter what form the ground we have is, God gives all of us ground to steward. We don't own that ground – those gifts, abilities, acumen and opportunities. They are gifts on loan to us, as the rest of the story will illustrate.

God always owns the ground; the critical question is what we do with the ground entrusted to us.

The rich man does not get this fundamental principle. He refers to 'my crops, my surpluses and my barns.' God is not part of his conversation as to how he will use this surplus.

The question the man asks himself is how he should deal with the unexpected and happy predicament of having a bumper harvest. Tragically, the already rich man does not ask himself whether he is already rich enough and whether there is something else he could do with the grain other than enrich himself further. His question is not about the morality of having more money, but practicality of storage. The rich man is blind to his own insatiable greed.

King Solomon was a staggeringly wealthy man, and yet towards the end of his life, all of his riches left him feeling hollow. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon looks back on his life and says this:

Whoever loves money never has enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income.
(Ecclesiastes 5:10)

Seeing the bumper harvest, the rich man is not satisfied with the wealth he once had and so he tears down his barns so he can build bigger ones. The man makes this decision in complete isolation; the conversation he has is with himself and himself alone. He thinks alone, ponders alone and decides alone.

To the people listening to the story in Jesus' day, this would have been striking. Then, community was everything, whether you lived in a large city or in a small village. Decisions large and small were never made without consulting your family or friends or the elders. You would talk any issues through before making a decision.

In talking only to himself, the rich man reveals that he has no friends or confidantes he trusts enough to ask advice. The rich man has built a self-imposed prison with his wealth. He has no community to celebrate his wealth with.

All on his own, the rich man makes his decision to build bigger barns, imagining the day when he can kick back, eat, drink and be merry. But then his daydreaming is rudely interrupted by a voice from heaven.

'You fool!', God yells.

The bible has four Greek words for 'fool', and this one (aphron) is the strongest.

'You idiot, you numbskull, you moron, you blockhead, you nitwit, you cretin, you dolt, you dope, you dunce, you dunderhead, you goose, you ignoramus, you twit, you clown – you fool!'

The rich man with barns overflowing with grain loses it all in an instant as a voice from heaven proclaims the end of his life, and the return of his soul. In that awful moment the rich man discovers that his life that his very life was not his own, that it was on loan from God, and that just as God gives, God can also take away.

The rich man had created for himself a mirage of security with his wealth. But his wealth could not save him when the moment of his death arrived, for rich and poor alike face the brutal reality that the death rate hovers somewhere close to 100%. The Apostle James puts it this way:

For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

(James 1:11)

When it was all over, the rich man whose barns could not hold his grain was left with empty hands and eternal isolation.

The man who had gone nutty had no more nuts left.

As we finish, I want us to look at the two warnings Jesus brackets this story with and make some practical applications:

(Jesus) said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

(Luke 12:15)

Jesus warns us to be on our guard against all forms of greed. Jesus does not offer us an option but a command. The grammar is forceful – the tense in the original Greek is present imperative.

Jesus is effectively saying:

'Continually, habitually and in all ways follow this command! Be committed for the long term. Develop lifelong habits and practices that will ensure that your heart is never ensnared by the false God of money. Every day and in every way; be vigilant and guard you heart against greed.'

Guarding our heart against greed is a life and death struggle. It is a life-long war.

You will have heard of the term 'white elephant'? A white elephant is an expensive distraction. Gordon MacDonald tells the story of the origin of the phrase:

In ancient days when the king of Siam (Thailand) had an enemy he wanted to torment and destroy, he would send that enemy a unique gift, a white elephant, a live, albino elephant. These animals were considered sacred in the culture of that day. So the recipient of that elephant had no choice but to intentionally care for the gift. This elephant would take an inordinate amount of the enemy's time, resources, energy, emotions, and finances. Over time the enemy would destroy himself because of the extremely burdensome process of caring for the gift.

An obsession with wealth, or greed, may not destroy you physically, but it can and will kill us spiritually if left unaddressed. We too easily align our lives with pursuit of more money, rather than the pursuit of more of God. We easily obsess about the standard of our living, and give no thought to the standard of our giving.

Some of you are thinking, 'Well, at least he's not talking to me.' Actually I am talking to you. In our materialistic and hedonistic culture where everyone wants to be a millionaire, all of us, without exception have, are or will struggle with the subtle, but deadly distractions of greed.

Greed is an insidious spiritual weed that can choke our hearts.

In his book, Counterfeit Gods, Tim Keller says this:

Greed hides itself from the victim. The money god's modus operandi includes blindness to your own heart.

(Tim Keller)

The question is how. How do we guard our heart against greed?

The primary way we guard our heart against greed is by cultivating instead a heart of generosity. When in response to God's generosity, and with God's help we cultivate a heart of generosity, we crowd out any possibility for greed to take root in our lives. In cultivating a generous heart we are cultivating in fact a Christ-like heart. Louie Giglio puts it helpfully this way:

Generosity is not something God wants FROM you, as much as something He wants FOR you.
(Louie Giglio)

Here are four ways you can cultivate heart of generosity and so guard your heart against greed.

Give Proportionally

The bible teaches us that we should give according to what we have. To cultivate a generous heart we should give in direct proportion to the level God has blessed us materially. Here at Newlife we encourage everyone who calls Newlife home to give a tithe to support the work of the church. What is a tithe? A tithe is an offering to God of the first 10% of our income. Tithing is found all through the Old Testament, which leads some Christians to say that it doesn't apply to us. To that I would say this:

Tithing is an Old Testament law that is a New Testament principle.

Tithing is not the end point in cultivating a generous heart, but a helpful, and I passionately believe, necessary starting point. Tithing is the baseline from which we dive into the deeper adventures of sacrificial giving. Sue and I started taking tithing seriously soon after we were married. Without doubt it has been one of the most catalytic spiritual disciplines for our spiritual growth. If you haven't yet, I implore you to try it.

Sometimes I hear people on good incomes say they cannot afford to tithe.

Often what they really mean is that their expanding standard of living can't afford them to tithe.

In the end it's not a matter of whether you can afford to tithe, but whether your heart can afford you not to.

Give Regularly

To cultivate a generous heart we must establish a regular and disciplined pattern of giving. Paul encouraged people in his churches to bring their offerings to worship every week. Now some of you today still do that, but increasing numbers of you are doing as Sue and I are, giving electronically. The method doesn't matter; the commitment to regularly give is. On giving regularly, Mark Driscoll says this:

When we give, we are saying, "I don't want to worship my wealth; I want to worship with my wealth."
(Mark Driscoll)

Give Sacrificially

In 2 Corinthians, Paul commends the Macedonian churches who gave offerings as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Beyond tithing, God helps us cultivate a heart of generosity as we learn to give sacrificially – that is in such a way as we feel the cost. For example, we might choose to postpone, defer or even give up some planned expenditure so that we can support a need that God has laid on our heart. Every time we do this we loosen greed's grip on our heart. On giving sacrificially, CS Lewis said this:

No one can settle how much we ought to give. The only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.
(C.S. Lewis)

Give Cheerfully

In 2 Corinthians, Paul says this:

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

(2 Corinthians 8:7)

When we see the offering debit on our bank statement, or when we put money into the offering bag as it passes us by – this should not be our demeanor. (I just had to put that photo up once more)

Giving is a privilege. Giving is a joy. Every time we give generously, we guard our heart against all types of greed.

Most likely you don't know this man. His name is Ronald Wayne. In 1976 he joined two young electronics wizards, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak to form a company you may well have heard of; Apple. Ronald Wayne was older than the other two and was described as the 'adult supervision' of the company. He wrote up the original partnership agreement and came up with the concept of the Apple logo. Ronald Wayne had a 10% shareholding in the company.

Had.

Just two weeks after the company started, facing some personal financial challenges, Ronald Wayne sold his 10% share in Apple to a venture capitalist for \$800. In the comp sold his 10% stake in Apple for \$800. Want to know how much that 10% shareholding in Apple is worth today? As at Friday it is \$41 Billion. Today Ronald Wayne is retired and happily living in a caravan in Nevada.

Ronald Wayne made a monumentally bad investment decision.

But here's the thing; it is possible for us to make an even worse one. How? By investing our life in accumulating more stuff, rather than seeking more of God. Jesus concluded the parable with this statement:

(Jesus said), "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

(Luke 12:21)

This is how it will be if we seek security in material things rather than in God. This is how it will be if greed rather than generosity rules our heart.

This is how it will be. At the end, when we draw our last breath, all of it disappears like vapor on the wind - and all that is left is this one life, this soul that God has given to us on loan. What happens to that soul depends on whether we have lived a life 'rich toward God', or not.

A life 'rich towards God' is a life that chooses to receive the eternal riches available to you through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus rather than pursuing the momentary riches and pleasures of this world.

A life rich toward God has first, by faith, received eternal riches from God.

A life rich toward God knows there is a greater reward in heaven awaiting those who know God –who are known by God - than any bank account, shareholding or property portfolio could offer.

In 2 Corinthians Paul says this:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

(2 Corinthians 8:9)

Through the Cross of Jesus Christ a beautiful exchange was made possible. Through faith – by confessing with our lips that Christ is Lord and by believing in our heart that God raised him from the dead – we exchange our spiritual poverty for all the riches that Jesus has as the only begotten son of the Father.

In exchange for my...

Spiritual poverty – spiritual riches
Unrighteousness – Righteousness
Mistakes - Perfection
Brokenness – Wholeness
Guilt – Innocence
Fear - Peace
Imperfection – Perfection
Faithlessness – Faithfulness
Inconsistency – Consistency
Sorrow – Joy
Desolation – deliverance
Ruins of my life – Resurrection in his life
Shame – Honor
Pain – Comfort
Sin – Salvation

To be rich towards God is to know the only wealth that matters, the only inheritance that lasts is found in a Father who loves us, through a Son who died for us.

The worst investment decision you could make, without any doubt whatsoever, is to invest your hope and find your security and identity in things other than God.

Last year the New York Times published an article with the title, ‘The Downside of Cohabitation.’ The article noted that more and more couples are living together before they get married; in fact the majority. Common thinking behind this trend is that it is better to get to know your potential spouse up close and personal before you enter the commitment of marriage. Equally common is the perception that couples that live together before marriage are less likely to get divorced should they eventually marry. The exact opposite is actually the case. This is what the article says:

Couples who cohabit before marriage (and especially before an engagement or an otherwise clear commitment) tend to be less satisfied with their marriages — and more likely to divorce — than couples who do not. Researchers call these negative outcomes are called the cohabitation effect.

Curious about this phenomenon, researchers discovered that many couples who divorce after living together before they married suffer from what they call, ‘Sliding before Deciding’. Often couples slide into dating, a relationship, living together and eventually slide into marriage without really making a conscious commitment to the relationship, or even having a conversation about it. The article’s author put it this way:

A life built on top of “maybe you’ll do” simply may not feel as dedicated as a life built on top of the “we do” of commitment or marriage.

Here is my point. Some of us labor under the delusion that we can slide into a relationship with God, or perhaps even slide into heaven itself. But the bible is clear; our repose to Jesus cannot be simply ‘maybe you’ll do’. In trusting him with our life, Jesus calls us to decide to leave everything behind so that we can follow him into an eternal adventure.

When Jesus hung on the Cross for you and for me, he did not look at us with a shrug and say, ‘Maybe you’ll do...’ Rather, Jesus said to us this:

‘You, you are my beloved! Here in my nail scarred hand and my pierced side and this crown of thorns is a demonstration of that love. Place your life in my hands – your messed up, mistake riddled, sin-stained, spiritually impoverished life. Place it in my hands by faith, and in exchange I will give you all the glorious riches of my grace – forgiveness that liberates, mercy that heals, love that makes your heart kick and life – abundant life – life that overflows with life, from now to eternity.’

Some of us today have to stop sliding, and instead decide – knowing that God has already done so. And his answer is ‘Yes!’