

The Kingdom of God is NEAR, So Disciples are Rich (toward God!)

A sermon for July 31, 2016

Luke 12:13-21

[Lansdowne UMC](http://lansdowneumc.org)

We've been talking during the month of July about the thing that Jesus talks about the most: the Kingdom of God. And today we're finishing up our four part series. If you missed out on any of the previous installments, check out [lansdowneumc.org](http://lansdowneumc.org), where you'll find transcripts and audio for every sermon during the past month.

Let's hear these words of Jesus one more time, from the 12th chapter of Luke, the 15th verse: "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

<prayer>

Most of us, I'm guessing, are not particularly fond of this story. But when Jesus speaks, we know we should pay attention. And when Jesus says "be on your guard," I think we should pay closer attention.

The man who comes to Jesus presents him with a teachable moment-- an opportunity for Jesus to teach not only the man who comes to him in order to resolve a specific issue, but also to teach everyone who was following him. Jesus told them, and Jesus tells us, to be on guard against greed.

To illustrate the foolishness of chasing after material wealth, he tells a story about a rich man whose abundant harvest leaves him saying, "What should I do? I don't have anywhere to store my harvest!" So he

decides to *make* a place to store it. And instead of using additional farm land for a barn, he tears down the smaller barn and builds a larger one in its place.

Now, by worldly standards, this is a logical thing to do. He doesn't need the income now. He might need it later.

But God speaks to the man some haunting words. “Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?”

Before we hear these words from God, most of us, I imagine, would love to be in the position of the man in the parable. Rich already, and then, after a windfall, feeling like we needed to build a bigger place to store our stuff and actually having the means to do so!

Yes, indeed, this seems exactly like the type of person we'd like to be. We'd like to have it all planned out so that we can retire in financial security and comfort.

We like to have *faith* in our savings. We like to find our safety and security in it. We like having the means to do what we want to do: to relax, eat, drink, and enjoy ourselves. In *it* we find the hope of a better life. But as the parable makes clear, this hope and trust is misplaced.

This is why our reading from Colossians says that greed is idolatry. Greed puts possessions in the place of God. Like all idols, greed makes enticing promises: not only for pleasure and prestige, but also for safety, security, and freedom. And although Greed may deliver on some of these promises, somehow it always ends up cheating you. When asked

“how much is enough?” Greed can be counted on to respond “at least a little bit more.” But when a little bit more comes, it’s not enough. It’s never enough.

Greed isn’t just the territory of big bad wall street executives or compulsive gamblers. That’s precisely why Jesus feels the need to warn *all* his disciples about it.

There can be no doubt that greed is a very natural thing to fall into. Keeping ourselves from it will require a change of heart. Jesus invites us to change our hearts and our lives. Or in the words of Paul in his letter to the Colossians: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

I want to share with you a little bit about how God changed my heart about how I think about money. My story is not remarkable in any particular way-- it’s quite common actually-- but it is *my* story. And I don't mean in any way to imply that I have arrived at some incredibly faithful practice of using money. But God has changed my heart.

The year after Katie and I got married, I joined her home church on a missions trip to the Dominican Republic. I want to tell you all about what we did and continue to do there, but for now, I need to focus on just one aspect of this trip. The trip allowed me to make friends with people whose life experiences could not have been more different from my own, save for the fact that we shared one thing in common: we wanted to be faithful disciples of Jesus.

Growing up, I had everything I needed. I never missed a meal unless I was fasting for spiritual or medical reasons. Many of my friends in the Dominican Republic, however, are thankful when they have one meal a day.

Here in the U.S., you can turn on the tap virtually anywhere in the county (with the tragic exception of Flint, Michigan) and safely drink the water that comes out. // Many people I know in the Dominican Republic are forced to drink water that is contaminated with bacteria, parasites, and heavy metals.

I have access to the best healthcare in the world here in Baltimore. And if I couldn't afford it, it wouldn't be denied to me. // For many people in the Dominican Republic, seeing a doctor is simply not part of their reality, so everything from infections to cancers can go untreated for months or years.

But as poor as my friends are, they've taught me immensely about Jesus' call to serve. They constantly steer any resources we might bring toward those who are worse off than themselves. More than many, I think, they realize that no matter how little you have, there is someone who has even less.

And although you don't need to travel to another country to realize this, they have helped me to understand that what I have is not my own. The scriptures say, "Don't think to yourself, My own strength and abilities have produced all this prosperity for me. Remember the LORD your God! He's the one who gives you the strength to be prosperous...."

Fundamental to my Christian understanding of possessions is that anything everything that I have comes from God. It has been entrusted to me to be used in a way that is consistent with loving God and loving my neighbor. That's what we mean when we talk about being a steward. We are not owners, but managers.

The man in the parable has no idea what to do with his produce. He doesn't consider his God or his neighbor in the slightest. He himself is the only person in his world. If only he had looked on his own doorstep, he would have seen people in need-- probably even his own workers. He would have seen that his wealth was food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, treatment for the sick.

Seeing the world through Jesus' eyes changes our concerns. In Christ, my safety and security is provided for. *Christ* is my life, not an abundance of possessions. And because God has given me the Holy Spirit, who assures me that I am secure in God's care, the question is no longer "how much must I store up to be secure?" Now the question, given that I am secure in God, is "what do I need to not give away?" The question is not "how might I become rich in possessions?" but "how might I become rich toward God?"

It's no longer looking for more things to want. Instead, it's constantly reevaluating our definition of the word "need."

I want to leave you with 3 very practical guidelines that come from John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. [First though, I have to share that I used to get annoyed when preachers would talk about John Wesley. Why not just talk about Jesus? I bring up John Wesley for one

reason: the more I've learned about him and his life, and the more I've read of his writings, the more he has challenged me *and* enabled me to be a more faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.]

So everyone wake up. This is good stuff.

The first is easy to get behind: "Gain all you can." Gain all you can without being hurtful to yourself or your neighbor, using all of the gifts God has given you, and not wasting time.

The second guideline is this: "save all you can." Now by this, Wesley does not mean save your money in a bank. He means be frugal-- striving not to be constantly seeking more and more things, but striving toward only spending what you really need to.

And then there is the third guideline, which is the one that protects us from greed. Give all you can. After you have provided for your needs and for the needs of your family, as you are able, provide for the needs of those in the church, and for the those in the world.

So may you avoid every type of greed, which sets itself up in place of God. May you hear God's call that goes out to all of us, wherever we are financially, to be more faithful with what we have been entrusted with. And as you pursue this greater faithfulness, may you become rich toward God. Amen.