

Rich Toward God
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July 31, 2022
First Presbyterian Church
McMinnville, Oregon

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" 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." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 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. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 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?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

In my Junior year of High School, my English teacher made the comment that every story ever told, or yet to be told—be it book, movie, television, whatever—every story is a retelling of Shakespeare or the Bible. Now, I'm not sure if this is true or not, but I have thought about it a lot over the last few decades, and it holds up pretty well. When I first read our scripture for today, I immediately thought, there are so many stories that have been told that can be traced back to this story. Every parent can relate when one of their children come stomping into the room and demands for them to make their sibling share. And likewise, every child can relate when they come to their parents to solve a problem and get a lecture in the form of a puzzling story instead. Bottomline, today's scripture is relatable, common, and something we don't always love to hear.

As American's, our culture—no matter what generation you are a part of—is formed on independence and self-sufficiency. We don't love people telling us how we should spend our money, use our resources, or prioritize our time...especially the government or the church. Every church I have been a part of—EVERY SINGLE ONE, including this one—I have had multiple people tell me candidly "I like our pastor, I just wish they wouldn't talk about money so much". We are possessive over our hard-earned resources.

When we talk about money and stewardship in the church its usually around the time that we are setting our budget for the next year. The church is asking you to fill out a pledge for the coming budget. And I wholeheartedly believe that is worthwhile and something you should consider do if you are not. But, that's not what I want to talk about today. I want to step back from the "should" and "musts" and expectation that are so wrapped up in the discussion of stewardship and resources. Because like the brothers in our stories who come looking for a clear arbiter for their problem, they instead are meet with a Jesus who makes the situation much grayer and more nuanced.

Our scripture begins with someone yelling out "Hey Jesus! My brother is not sharing our inheritance. Make him share!" In Judaic inheritance practices the older brother would be intitled to two-thirds (2/3)

of the inheritance and the younger brother would be intitled to one third (1/3). We don't know if the brother is asking for what is due to him or if he is asking for more than his expected share. But either way, Jesus can't be bothered. He says "I'm not here to settle your dispute. Just make sure that you're not being greedy because life is not based on the possessions you have." Okay cool? Thanks for settling that, Jesus?

This story comes flanked by two other stories of siblings who are equally frustrated with the choices their other siblings are making. A few chapters before this, is the story of Mary and Martha. Martha is concerned with the way Mary is spending her time. Martha complains "Jesus tell her to get back to work and stop wasting her time sitting around talking." We expect Jesus to tell Mary to get back to work, but instead Jesus praises Mary and encourages Martha to not be so wrapped up in using all her time to work. Time is valuable and Jesus wants to make sure we are using our time wisely.

A few chapters after our scripture we get the well-known story of the father with two sons. One son asks for his inheritance and disowns his family to go spend money and live a lavish life. He later returns humbled, embarrassed, and destitute. His father welcomes him home with an extravagant celebration. Seeing a party in progress the other brother asks what's going on and is greatly upset that the father so quickly welcomes his brother back into the family. Jesus explains through the father that we value people and want them to thrive.

Between these three sets of siblings, we are told that we should be wise with our money. Making sure we are not greedy and living a life of excess. We are told that we should be wise with our time. Making sure that we are not getting so wrapped up with tasks, but instead make time to be present and attentive to what is important. And we are told that we should value the wellbeing of people. Making sure that we are cheering on others to live a life with purpose where they are able to use their talents wisely.

Looking back to our scripture, Jesus goes on to tell the story of a man who had an extraordinary year of harvest. His harvest was so good, that he had to tear down his barns and build larger ones. And then he decides that he is going to put his feet up and relax. It says that he plans to "relax, eat, drink, be merry". That sounds good to me. But Jesus uses this man as an example of what not to do, calling him a fool. He ends by saying we should instead aim to be "rich towards God".

Rich towards God. That sounds like a good Biblical saying. Rich towards God. That sounds deep and theological and wise. Rich towards God. Yes, let's do that. Ok. But what does it mean? Being rich towards God invites us to use our resources—our time, our talents, and our treasure—to glorify God. The Westminster Catechism is a series of 107 questions and answers developed in the 17th century used to help instruct Christians in their faith. It is still part of our book of confessions today. The first question is: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer is: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever." One might rephrase that by saying "Our primary purpose is to be rich towards God." We are to use our resources to glorify God.

Establishing that we are to glorify God is the first step, but the next step in being "rich towards God" can be the hardest. How do we glorify God? I truly believe that this is where the beauty of our Christian faith lies. There is not one blanket answer for everyone. We are uniquely gifted with incredible, amazing talents. Some have an abundance of wealth that can help overcome obstacles. Some have the luxury of time to advocate. Each of us have distinctive skills to contribute. Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian pastor, he is 96 years old. He is also a phenomenal writer; I recommend any of his books to

you. My favorite quotation of his is this: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” God didn’t create us to be miserable. God created us to delight, for praise. And in imploring us to be “rich towards God”, Jesus is spurring us to find that place where our gifts, our resources, our time, our talent, our treasure can be used to meet a need within the world. “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

This is not always easy. What makes hearing this call so difficult is that God's voice is not the only voice calling out to us. The challenge is to hear God's voice in a cacophony of voices.¹ Frederick Buechner goes on to say, “There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest.” I would venture to say that this is one way that community is important. Discernment come in prayer, thoughtfulness, and self-awareness, but it also comes by surrounding yourself with voices that are also trying to tune into God’s voice. Community can be vital in helping to affirm your gifts and pointing you in the direction where God is calling you. When I first explored going into full time ministry, someone told me to keep a journal of all the times people affirm my call to ministry. I appreciate this intentional act of looking for voices that God was using and continues to use to help me discern where God is calling me.

I want to end with this. Being rich towards God is not a one-time thing. The ways we are called to use our resources—our time, our talent, our treasure—will continue to evolve over the years. Your deep gladness in one season of life, might not be the right fit for another season of life. Your monetary resources might be stretched thin in one season a life, and in another, you might find that you have more money that can be specifically given for God’s glory. You might have excess time that you are able to give in one season of life and in another you find you need to take a step back. We can only be rich towards God when we keep our focus on God. Perpetually evaluating where and how God is calling us. Constantly evaluating where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.

I encourage you to intentionally, evaluate or reevaluate how God is calling you to use your time, your skills, your money to glorify God. May you find deep gladness as you strive to be rich towards God.

¹ <http://www.calledthejourney.com/blog/2014/12/17/frederick-buechner-on-calling>