

SERMON

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What does the rich man do wrong?

Jesus responds to a request to be a judge with this story and like so many of his parables, we'd like to find the easy answer and move right along. But as I've said before, parables are intended to give us the opportunity to think deeply about our faith – not to latch on to the easy answer and assume we have it all figured out.

Because the moment we think we have it all figured out, then maybe we've just been focused on building bigger barns too.

It seems as if Jesus starts this story after already giving the conclusion. To the request from someone in the crowd who was trying to win an argument with his brother, Jesus says, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." And then launches into this story about a rich landowner. He wraps it up in the end with the "moral of the story" by saying "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

End scene. For us, right now this morning, it is the end of the scene. "The Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ." Storing up treasure in barns is bad. But if that's what Jesus was going for, if that's the negative example Jesus offers, then what's the gospel? What's the good news? What are we supposed to do instead?

We start by thinking carefully about the setting of this story – told to an agrarian society that has no refrigeration, no modern science, no schools of agriculture to help them understand crop rotation and water management. If the land produces abundantly, doesn't it make perfect sense to store up that "treasure" for what is to come?

I seem to recall a story from the book of Genesis about a dreamer, named Joseph, who finds his way out of prison by explaining to the Pharaoh that he has to build bigger barns to prepare Egypt for the famine to come. Are bigger barns really the problem?

Or maybe it's because once he has those barns built, he dares to think to himself that he doesn't have to work anymore. "Eat, drink, be merry" becomes his mantra. Maybe that's what he does wrong. Maybe, instead of thinking that way about his abundance, he is supposed to be a good capitalist and use the abundance to create generational wealth for him and his family. Maybe this is a story about wiser wealth management.

Except that seems to be the direct rebuke that God offers. "You fool!" God says, and points out the frailty of life, dismissing the idea that this man should be storing up

treasure like he is. Our scene may have ended here this morning, but Jesus goes on to talk about the ravens and the lilies and how God cares for them even though they have no barns or retirement plan.

So maybe the parable is telling us to live for today, maybe that's what the rich fool does wrong. Could that be it? I don't know. At this point maybe you can tell that I'm stalling, because I don't know exactly what the rich fool does wrong.

That's always part of a parable, we don't actually **know** the point of the story.

We can take this text and turn it into a fairly straightforward stewardship message about the proper way to store up the treasure God has given you...and that wouldn't be wrong. We could take this story and think about how much time and energy we spend worrying about the size of the barn instead of what can be done with what has been stored in the barn...and we wouldn't be wrong.

We can think about how we can carefully steward our treasures for now and **also** for later so that we're not forgetting to do what is important and needed now while we also prepare for what is coming down the road...and we'd probably be doing a good job of stewarding what we have. We might be getting a little far afield from the point of the story, but we wouldn't be wrong.

Because, in the end, this isn't a story that is going to break down simply into an easily marketed platitude about how we live our lives. It's not just a nicely placed stewardship message about time, talent, and treasure. And maybe **that's** the point.

Whenever I encounter a parable, I turn to the books of Robert Farrer Capon. He was an episcopal priest who wrote three volumes of analysis of Jesus' parables. And in his analysis of this parable, one he ties directly to the teaching of the Lord's prayer that we heard about last week, by the way; Capon says this,

"If the world could have lived its way to salvation, it would have, long ago. The fact is that it can only die its way there, lose its way there. The precise temptation, therefore, into which we pray we will not be led is the temptation to reject our saving death and try to proceed on our living own."

As Capon points out, we often fail to recognize just how hopelessly lost and dead we are...and that's why we need grace for salvation. "If the world could have lived its way to salvation..."

Think about the parable again with that as your lens. How many times does the rich fool talk to or about himself? Always. **I will do this. I will do that. I said to myself.** Perhaps what the rich fool does wrong is to focus entirely on his own abilities and accomplishments (if owning land can be seen as an accomplishment). He thinks he is successful on his own, because of himself; and that nothing else is needed. He doesn't realize the only thing that is **actually** needed is to die...which he will, that very night.

There are some truly important and good images of stewardship in this text about how we live as individuals and as a community of faith when it comes to managing our resources, how we store up treasure in heaven with the choices we make.

But all of that comes as a **response** to the reality of being a fool to begin with. We can't build our way into the kingdom of God. We can't accomplish our salvation through resource management. We don't do this on our own. We are nothing more than the lilies of the field that God cares for out of grace-filled love. Instead of trying to figure how best to build the barn or how much we should save for later, maybe we should just admit that we don't know the answers.

Again, from Father Capon, "Of all the desires for wealth, practically the last one we will give up is the desire for mental and spiritual richness. Yet Jesus is only urging his disciples, and us, to do what he himself did in his own trial and passion: to lay down his life and to let God raise it up in his own good time."

Maybe instead of trying to determine that we have all the answers, maybe instead of deciding we're better than this rich fool, we should just admit that we're not the landowner at all, we're probably the grain. And the grain doesn't do anything at all except to die and be reborn to new life. Amen.