

September 9, 2018

Parables

A Wisdom Parable

The Rich Fool

Luke 12:13-21

Opening words: There came a time in Jesus's earthly ministry when he was no longer welcomed in the synagogues. The Master was forced to teach in the open air and change his teaching method. For the first time, he used fictional stories to teach divine truth. We call those stories "parables". Webster defines a *parable* as, a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. A parable is not an allegory or a fable. They are different. A parable stands on its own. The Gospel of Luke contains both the largest number of parables (24) and eighteen unique parables. The Gospel of Matthew contains 23 parables of which eleven are unique; and the Gospel of Mark contains eight parables of which two are unique. The Gospel of John contains no parables, only allegories.

In his book, *The Parables of Jesus*, James Montgomery Boice tells us the parables of Jesus can be categorized. He says all the parables of Jesus can be broken down into five different categories. These are his categories:

The Wisdom Parables
The Salvation Parables
The Christian Life Parables
The Judgement Parables
The Kingdom Parables

Over the next five weeks, we will look at one parable from each category. Today, we look at a wisdom parable, the parable of The Rich Fool. There are others: The Five Foolish Women, The Shrewd Man of the World, and the Wise and Foolish Builder are all wisdom parables. Our scripture reading for today is Luke 12:13-21. Let me call this message *The Rich Fool*.

Luke 12:13-21 ¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

¹⁴ Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" ¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

¹⁸ "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. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

²⁰ "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?'

²¹ "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

Rick Warren (born 1954) of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California once said, "*Living in the light of eternity changes your priorities.*" I know he is right because that is all part of my story. If that quote is part of your story, say, "**Amen!**"

This morning we find ourselves in the twelfth chapter of Luke. Last week, I finished my sixty-four-part sermon series on the Book of Acts, *Church Planting*. Acts is the sequel of Luke. The Gospel of Luke tells us about Jesus up to his resurrection. Acts tells us about the establishment of the early church. Combined, they are a single story. Both pieces of literature are written to Theophilus. It has been debated through the years whether Theophilus is an individual believer or a group of believers. *Theophilus* literally means "one who loves God." It really doesn't matter to us. The only thing that matters is that we believe. It is interesting to note that the Gospel of Luke was written about the year 70 to a Gentile audience. It was written to persecuted believers to embolden their faith in Jesus Christ.

By the twelfth chapter, much has already happened. Jesus is in Judea, and our parable of the day is part of a larger section of divine teachings. Just prior to our reading, we are told Jesus was surrounded by a great crowd. The Master is both warning and encouraging the crowd. Jesus tells them to keep their eyes fixed on God. In the middle of this great teaching, Jesus is interrupted. The man obviously hadn't heard a word that Jesus had said. The reason is, he is preoccupied with a personal problem. His problem is complex because it combines two of life's most complex topics, family and money. Some things don't change; family issues and money are still complex topics. That is why verse thirteen resonates with us. The author quotes the man with these words, "*Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.*" As a member of the modern clergy, I have never been asked to help settle family estates. In Jesus's day, it was common to take such problems to teachers or rabbis. As a rule, the older brother always received a double portion of the inheritance. Jesus saw the problem instantly. The Master knew the man's request was rooted in selfishness and materialism. In other words, Jesus knew the man's problem was greed. Jesus knew his priorities were all mixed up. Then, he told the following story.

The ground of a certain rich man produced a bumper crop. That was a good thing and a bad thing. It was a good thing because his crop was valuable. It was a bad thing because he had no place to store his crop. To the business world, the problem was solved easily. He tears down his original barn and builds a bigger one. Once this bumper crop is harvested and stored, his life will be easier. It is a great plan except for one major flaw. The man suddenly dies and is separated from his earthly possessions. This is the truth: The man was financially successful, but spiritually bankrupt. That

makes me ask you an interesting question. How many successful, spiritually bankrupt people do you know? Could it be you are a successful, spiritually bankrupt person? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" I have said it a million times.

Money is amoral. Money is neither good nor bad. It is how we handle and view our money that makes it good or bad. That is the case in this story. This parable is filled with personal pronouns. Listen to the story again with that filter.

"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* will do. *I* will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there *I* will store my surplus grain. And *I* will say to *myself*, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

Jesus's simple story is dominated by personal pronouns. In verses sixteen through nineteen, the word, "I" is uttered six times by the rich fool. Like the man with the problem, the man in the story is consumed with selfishness and materialism. The man with the problem and the man within the story are victims of greed. Yet, the story is not really about money. It is a story about priorities. The man with the problem and the man in the parable's greatest priority was money. What is your greatest priority? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" Sometimes our greatest priorities are bad things. How many examples do you need?

On January 10 of this year, Raleigh, North Carolina's newspaper, *The News Observer*, reported that a former East Carolina football player was killed over missing drugs. His name was Anthony Lennon. This is the story. The drugs were coming from the West Coast to North Carolina. The problem was, the carrier of the drugs was arrested in Chicago and lost the drugs. Police believe the financier of the drugs had Lennon set up and killed because someone had to pay. It is a sad story, but it makes a clear point. To that group of shady characters, drugs was a big priority. Sometimes our greatest priorities are bad things. However, this is also true: Sometimes our greatest priorities are good things. The problem is, our good things aren't the best thing.

The other night, I googled the question, what is your greatest priority in life? There is an app called Quora. On that app or website, people respond to all kinds of questions. People responded to our question in all kinds of ways. One guy said the highest priority in his life was survival skills. One woman answered the greatest priority in her life was her clothes, make-up and hair. Someone else said the greatest priority in their life was finding a life partner. One gentleman said, his greatest priority in his life was sex. What is your answer to the question, what is your greatest priority? I would bet your answer is close to my answers.

One of my priorities is financial stability. There are four things you need to know about my personal finances. First, I am a fiscal conservative. I am uncomfortable

carrying any kind of debt. I have been known to pay the bill before the bill comes. I do not expect to die rich, but I hope I die debt-free. Second, I am terrified of the Internal Revenue Service. I think, everyone should be afraid of the IRS. Third, I recognize everything I have in this world is only on loan from God. The last thing I am going to do financially is cheat God. Fourth, I value work. I was raised in a steel town in Northeast Ohio, where work was not just valued, it was expected. One of my priorities in my life is financial stability. If one of your priorities is financial stability, say, **"Amen!"**

One of my priorities is good health. In January of 1957, my grandmother came home from church and was preparing lunch for her family. She never ate that meal, because she dropped dead from a fatal heart attack. She didn't get to be my age. My family tree is filled with high blood pressure. Every morning, I get up and take my medicine, so I won't have a heart attack. My greatest fear in life is not being dead. It is lying in a bed in a nursing home unable to care for myself. One of my priorities in my life is my health. If one of your priorities in your life is your health, say, **"Amen!"**

One of my priorities is my children and my granddaughter. I am proud of my children. They are doing fine, and they pay for themselves. I believe they are solid people for two reasons. First, they were raised in a single community and knew stability. I never longed for them to be Methodist gypsies wandering around the East Ohio Annual Conference. They are good people because they are a product of a good community. Second, they knew and know that Kathryn and I are there for them. They don't need us, but we need to be needed in some way. They know, we want what is best for them. It goes without saying. We want what is best for our granddaughter, Pippa. If one of your priorities in your life is your children and your grandchildren, say, **"Amen!"**

One of my priorities is my spouse. Kathryn and I got married thirty years ago. The time has gone fast; I wish I could slow life down. There are so many things we would like to do together. There are so many places we would like to go together. I have never hidden my feelings for her. My life began on the day we met. My greatest priority in this world is my wife. Nothing seems to matter without her. If one of your priorities in your life is your spouse, say, **"Amen!"** Let me ask you the question again. What are your priorities?

None of those things are bad things. The problem is, none of those things are eternal. Someday, I am going to be separated from my material possessions. Someday, there is an excellent chance I am going to get a terminal disease or get in a fatal accident. The problem is, there is only so much I can do for my children or my granddaughter. There is an excellent chance Kathryn and I will not leave this world together. Like it or not, we are all terminal from birth. It is a cruel fact. The world is constantly changing. The only thing that is completely stable is God. Only God is eternal. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Several years ago, I was called by one of the local funeral homes to officiate at a service. I did not know the deceased. I was called for one reason. Neither the deceased or anyone in the family had a church home. They didn't even know a member of the clergy. However, they wanted to celebrate their loved one's life. As is my custom, I went to the calling hours to meet with the family. It was a painful couple of minutes. The family began by confessing they didn't go to church. In their minds, they had good reasons. I told them I wasn't there to judge them, I was there to help them celebrate their loved one's life. As they told me about him, I discovered he was a good person. He would do anything for anyone. He had worked hard and was well respected by his peers. His hobbies always included family members. His absence would leave a great void in their lives. His brother said, "He lived everyday to the fullest. He lived as if he was never going to die." This is the problem: He did die. He was economically successful, but spiritually bankrupt. The funeral service went off without a hitch. His life was remembered. Some of the memories made people laugh. Some of the memories made people cry. The service ended with me giving the benediction. As is the custom, the last ones to view the body were the family members. Most family stayed for a few unpleasant minutes. This family stayed for what seemed like an eternity. Numb, they just stood there looking at the corpse. The veteran funeral director, who was a great churchman, motioned for me to come to him. He whispered in my ear, "Russ, I have seen it a million times. People with no faith linger, because once the service is over, it is over. People with faith move on because they know there is more. They know they will see their loved one again in heaven. This is the painful truth:

Someday, each one of us is going to die. No one gets out of this world alive. We are all terminal from birth. When your day comes, I hope you are economically successful. I hope you have loved your family and helped your friends. I hope you have done everything you want to do in this world. But, when your day comes, I hope you are spiritually successful too. There is more to life than this world. There is heaven. The rich fool wasn't prepared for the afterlife. Are you? The answer to that question has eternal consequences. Do you remember the quote from Rick Warren? He once said, "*Living in the light of eternity changes your priorities.* And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"