

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21

Another of Jesus's parables. And a good way into parables is to try to imagine being one of the characters in it, to try to imagine it unfolding as if you were there playing that role. The focus in this parable is, of course, on the rich man and how he gets it all wrong. But, because it's a caricature of a larger-than-life character, it may not be so easy to associate with him – of course, he gets it wrong, of course he's ridiculous, of course we couldn't possibly be like him, now could we? So, it might be more helpful to view it from the perspective of the unnamed person in the crowd who, through his words at the beginning, sets up the scene which leads to the teaching and the parable. And perhaps also to view it from the perspective of the crowd itself, being one of the crowd to whom the teaching and the parable are addressed. Perhaps we can associate more easily with them and him.

Now the statement he makes, trying to get the 'teacher' on his side and to adjudicate between him and his brother, probably stemmed from a situation in which their father had died without an oral or written will. And so, the estate was held between the two brothers and, according to the law of the times, the inheritance could not be divided until the older brother agreed.¹ So, this is probably the younger brother speaking and, apparently, seeking justice: the estate should be divided up; he should get his rightful share; justice should be done.

Now we know that Jesus was not indifferent to cries for justice – He frequently demonstrated compassion for the downtrodden, widows, orphans, outcasts. But here He refuses to be drawn into the role of judge or arbiter. And that is perhaps because He sees into the hearts of people, as He did with the rich ruler who was told to sell his possessions, distribute the proceedings to the poor, and then follow Jesus (Luke 18:18-25). Perhaps Jesus sees something behind the request from the younger brother, something in him which needs to be exposed and questioned.

And it is something that has general application, not just for the individual concerned. So, Jesus turns to the crowd and begins to speak to them. And He begins with a general principle: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." The younger brother is being challenged, not over the justice of his position, but over bigger questions to do with greed and possessions, and how these relate to life in general. And so too is the crowd being challenged. And so too, of course, are we.

But hence to the parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly", So here is someone who is already rich and who, on top of that, seems to have had a bumper crop. But what we're supposed to note is that it is not his hard work, or his ingenuity in

¹ See Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern eyes*, SPCK, 2008, pp.298-308, who discusses this setting and parable at length.

developing a super-efficient agricultural system, that leads to the bumper crop. It is, so it seems, just luck or maybe providence.

But instead of thinking along those lines, or how he might share his good fortune with others, his focus is entirely on himself: “What should I do, for I have no place to store *my* crops? 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’”. We can probably imagine Jesus, the great story-teller, having the crowd in fits at the absurdity of it all.

But also, of course, at the sadness of it all. Here is a very rich man who has no one else to think about but himself. He is entirely on his own. What relationships he might have had – wife, family, friends, even employees – are nowhere to be seen. He is a tragic figure, alone on the stage, talking to himself.

And perhaps that speaks to the younger brother who raised the issue of his inheritance at the beginning. His father had died. The relationship with his older brother had clearly broken down. He also, so it seems, is alone. While he, probably rightly, wants justice, it seems that he too may be a tragic figure concerned only for himself and his rights.

But there is one relationship that neither the younger brother in real life, nor the rich man in the parable, can avoid: “You fool!” says God to the rich man, “this very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” It is, as the writer of Ecclesiastes put it, though with some extra feeling thrown in, “I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish?”

But the main points for the younger brother, the crowd and us are, of course, that we do not know how long we have left in this life, and that, when we do go, we cannot take our possessions with us. And so, Jesus, having told the parable, finishes as He began with another general principle: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves [we might add, ‘on earth’], but are not rich towards God”.

How might the younger brother, who brought the case of the injustice he was suffering, have reacted to this teaching and the parable? How might the crowd, perhaps entertained by the setting and the parable Jesus told, have reacted, particularly when wealth was seen as a reward from God? How might we react?

Well, perhaps for the younger brother, the apparent injustice he was experiencing had been set in a bigger context. How might he restore the relationship with his older brother so that he was no longer isolated? How, as and when he received his inheritance, which he himself hadn’t earned, (another bumper crop), might he use that to benefit not just himself but others?

For the crowd and us, perhaps these general principles and the parable say several things. But first, what they *don’t* say is that justice is not important. It clearly is, and we noted that Jesus frequently sided with those who suffered injustice. *Nor* does this say that possessions are not important. They clearly are, and for those in our society and the

world beyond who do not have enough, this does *not* say that their desire and search for material possessions, for food and economic security, are wrong. To take just one fact I came across recently, there are apparently 10 million people in the UK who are ‘overindebted’ – that’s to say, behind with their bills, and having to borrow to make ends meet.² This teaching and parable may have very little to say to them in their struggle just for existence.

But what this teaching and parable does say to everyone else is that “one’s life does consist in the abundance of possessions”. So, do not “store up treasures” for yourself here on earth, but instead be “rich towards God”. What might that mean? Well, there are two other parables of Jesus that speak to that, one being Matthew 25 – the sheep and the goats – where Jesus say, “Just as you did it [gave food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison], to one of the least of these ... you did it to me” (25:40). And the other parable is from Luke 16 where Jesus concludes by saying, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal home” (16:9). In both cases, the teaching and parable we have in our passage today, are emphasised – our possessions, whatever they may be, should be used to help others, to build relationships, to make friends. And in so doing, we find ourselves being rich towards God.

And if so, then at the end of our lives, instead of God’s words to the rich man, “You fool!”, we might just hear the words from yet another of Jesus’s parables, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave, you have been trustworthy in a few things ... enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25: 21).

Amen

² From DebtJustice, August 2025.