



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 12:13-21

To understand why valuing worldly material is foolish.

“What Makes Something Truly Valuable?”

Several years ago, construction workers were laying a foundation for a new building being constructed outside of the city of Pompeii. While working, the men found the corpse of a woman buried layers under the ground. Centuries prior, during the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, she had been caught in the rain of fire as she tried to flee the area and save her life. What surprised them was what was clutched in her hand: precious jewels. It appeared that she had prioritized these trinkets over anything else and in trying to save them, lost her own life. The irony is that while her body had wasted away and all that remained was a skeleton, the jewels were in nearly perfect condition. While she had moved on from this life towards her final destination, the jewels remained intact, still on the earth. The jewels had tremendous value during her life, but she was unable to take them with her into eternity. This raises the question: What makes something truly valuable?

The answer to this question can be found in the journal of Jim Elliot, a missionary who was martyred for his faith. He wrote, "A person is no fool to give up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose." It's foolish to spend a life gaining things that have no eternal value because the moment life is required of us, we cannot take anything with us into judgment. In Luke 12:13-21, Jesus tells the parable of a rich man who values worldly treasures over anything else and spends the majority of his life building up his riches. After working hard and becoming satisfied with his efforts, he is unable to enjoy any of it because he dies. This parable calls Christians to consider what makes something truly valuable.

An Issue of Inheritance

Verse 12 begins with a man in the crowd crying out to the Lord: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” There are a few things going on here that are peripheral to the main idea of this passage, but are important to really understanding the weight of Jesus’ words. The issue of inheritance and how it was divided was covered in the Torah. Deuteronomy 21:15-17 deals with the required equity of dividing inheritance among brothers. Since polygamy was often practiced in the early years of Jewish culture, it would not have been uncommon for a man to have sons and daughters from multiple women. Deuteronomy 21 dictates to the man that he may not give more inheritance to the sons and daughters of the wife he loves more; he must be impartial. Beyond that, Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:7-9 also speak to the ways inheritance should be handled. The reason this is an important detail to consider is that it sets the tone for what follows. If the man greedily wants more inheritance than what is required of the brother, then Jesus’ words really speak to any kind of greed and nothing more. However, if the man simply wants the inheritance rightly due to him to be divided per the Law, then Jesus’ words speak to not only greed, but any kind of material prioritization. Given the context of the parable, this seems to be the right reading. The man is not wrong for wanting his inheritance divided, although Jesus is not the correct person to mediate such a dispute, hence Jesus words in verse 14: “Who made Me a judge or arbitrator over you?” The issue is not wanting the law to be upheld, but the underlying desire to find satisfaction, security, or comfort in worldly things. Jesus responds: “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Lk. 12:15). After saying this, Jesus begins to tell a parable to further illustrate the danger of wanting an abundance of possessions.

The Parable of the Rich Fool

Jesus’ parable involves only one person. Below is a breakdown of some key details.

NO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Verses 16 and 17 begin the parable: “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’” Notice that the man refers to the crops as, “my crops,” and never gives an acknowledgment to God for such a profitable bounty. This strikes against the way the Old Testament imagines the providence of God. The Jewish people believed that everything belongs to God. Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the LORD’S and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” Psalm 104:14 says, “You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth.” This line of thinking is also reflected in a spiritual sense in the apostle Paul’s teaching: “I planted, Apollos watered, *but God gave the growth*. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, *but only God who gives the growth*” (1 Cor. 3:6-7, emphasis add). The point is that this rich man does not see the need to acknowledge *why* his crops have produced so well. This indicates something unhealthy about the state of the man’s heart.

NO COMMUNITY

Another detail that stands out is the reality that no one else is with this man. The ancient world, especially in the ancient Near East, was a very communal society. People would gather at city gates and in public places to discuss life and the world around them. Hospitality served a major role as well. Travelers did not have the ability to get from one place to another quickly in the same way that we do today. Therefore, they relied on the hospitality of strangers to take them in and care for them. Jesus is often seen throughout the Gospel dining with Pharisees, sinners, and Gentiles because this kind of communal eating was very common. This parable,

however, demonstrates no such community. This man, for all the abundance he has, has no one in his life for which to care. He lives in isolation.

NO RELATIONSHIP

The problem is not that the man had an abundance of crops, nor is it that he built bigger barns to store his abundance. It's hard to make a case against someone for building large storehouses to keep crops when God tells Joseph to do exactly that while he is in Egypt (Gen. 41:48-49). There is actually a fair amount of wisdom in storing grain and crops for a variety of reasons. However, the reason for why this man has built larger barns is not so that he can distribute his crops to the poor and needy, nor is it to prepare for a famine, but it's simply to find comfort and security in having an abundance of things. This man has no relationship with other people, nor does he have a relationship with God, and he doesn't seem to care. His "god" is his possessions. Verse 19 says, "And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." This is why he is referred to as a "fool" (Lk. 12:20). He has no authority to tell a soul to relax because he has not authority over any soul including his own. Why is he a fool? Because "this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be" (Lk. 12:20). He has prioritized things that will have no value the moment after he dies. Jesus summarizes His teaching in verse 21: "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." In other words, anyone who finds satisfaction in worldly things over and above spiritual things will be seen as foolish because the moment they die, those things will have no value anymore. Only the ones who treasure up spiritual treasure (i.e. obedience to Christ, sharing the Gospel, etc.) will find treasure for themselves in heaven that passes through the fires of judgment (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

What About Now?

The takeaway should be pretty evident; it is foolish to build up earthly treasure because it will not come with you when you die. It is better, then, to invest in the kingdom of heaven by growing in conformity to Christ, sharing the Gospel with other people, investing in discipleship with other believers, and serving the body with the gifts God has given you to edify, encourage, admonish, and exhort others (1 Th. 5:11-19).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 12:13. What does someone in the crowd ask Jesus to do? According to the notes above, was this an unusual thing for someone to ask?

2. Read Luke 12:14. How did Jesus respond to him?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 12:15. What does Jesus warn the crowd to be on guard against? What is the reason Jesus gives for this commandment?

2. Read Luke 12:16-17. How did Jesus's parable begin? What is the problem the man faced?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 12:18. What was the man's solution?

2. Read Luke 12:19. How did the man believe he would feel after building bigger storehouses?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 12:20. How did God respond to the man? What problem did God propose for the man?

2. Read Luke 12:21. What is the object lesson of this parable?

Week 48 Discussion: Prioritize the Right Things

In Luke 12:13-21, Jesus tells a parable to warn His disciples of the danger of storing up treasure on earth rather than in heaven because the treasure on earth will be useless when we die. Talk as a group about how you can re-prioritize what you treasure in order to better invest in the kingdom of heaven.

1. Icebreaker: What is your biggest priority in your life currently?
2. What earthly treasure is most appealing to you?
3. What heavenly treasure is most appealing to you?
4. How has investing in earthly treasure paid off for you in your life?
5. How has investing in heavenly treasure paid off for you? In other words, what tangible fruit can you point to that is a result of storing up treasure for heaven?
6. How can the church help you better prioritize the things you spend the most time on?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus tells a parable to illustrate the foolishness of investing in worldly treasure.
2. It is better to invest in heavenly treasure because earthly treasure will not come with you when you die.