

Riches

August 3, 2025

Psalm 49:1-12

Luke 12:13-21

It was an easy question, and it should have had an easy answer. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Behind the request is, I expect, a pretty painful story. Under first century Jewish custom, the eldest son received a double share of the property of a deceased father. That’s one of those examples of first-son favoritism that is part of so many cultures. The same eldest son, however, also had the responsibility to divide the property among the surviving siblings – which means the one who had the greatest interest in delaying the division also had to make the division. I imagine that lots of younger sons had the same problem with their older brothers.

Asking Jesus about it was a sign that Jesus was honored and respected. As Niveen Sarras writes at Working Preacher, “It was common in first-century Palestine for Jews to ask rabbis for a legal ruling. The man thought of Jesus as a respected rabbi who influenced people, and could convince his brother to give him his inheritance. By calling Jesus a teacher, he acknowledges his ‘authority to render a decision in his case.’”

Simple request: ask my brother to divide the property as he’s supposed to do. Simple answer: As a respected teacher, I rule that the brother should do what he’s supposed to do.

But if Jesus did the things he was expected to do, the Gospels would be very different.

Jesus launched into one of his favorite subjects, particularly in Luke’s Gospel: the problem of wealth. So he told a story.

The story, writes Meda Stamper at Working Preacher, “...reflects a central theme in Luke and in Jesus’ preaching, the problem of wealth in the context of the holy kingdom where closeness to God is life and attachment to things reflects soul-stifling anxiety and fear.” It’s the story of a rich man who had a good harvest. If we look at him in the light of Joseph’s story in Genesis, the successful farmer wanted to do what Joseph had done: store up the produce of a good year against the hazard of a bad year ahead. In Joseph’s case, we called that more than prudence. We called it inspired.

This wealthy man, however, had no notion of saving against need. He saved for himself. He didn’t mention the people who’d done the work. I suspect they got laid off after the barns were done. He wasn’t aware of his neighbors, either. “What of the widow who walks by and sees the new barns, full of grain, while she has no way of making a living?” asks Melissa Bane Sevier at

her blog. “What of the child whose parents choose between food for the children and food for the grownups? What of the rabbi who wishes he had food enough to give away to those who need it?”

“Abundance versus scarcity. Too much abundance for a few creates scarcity for so many more.”

Most of all though, Jesus called the character in his story – remember, it’s a story – a fool because he saved the wrong treasure for the wrong thing.

You may have heard me preach about money and riches a few times. Like most preachers, I have a limited set of ideas, and “the problem of wealth” is sermon number three. Of about seven. I’m in good company, of course. Jesus talked about the problem of wealth a lot, too.

Most of us have an uneasy relationship to money. First, most of us don’t think we have enough of it. There is usually something we can think of, which might be an item, a service, a comfort, that we don’t have and can’t get immediately.

Personally, I can think of plenty of things to spend money on, money I don’t have, at least at the moment. A friend thinks I should get an eight-string ukulele to join the four and six-string instruments I have. Well, I think so, too. I think there are some cool camera lenses that would be useful for taking pictures of flowers. And I’m always curious about microphones, and...

This is rapidly becoming a shopping list rather than a sermon, so let’s stop here.

I have uses for all this stuff. I think. You’d like to hear me play an eight-string ukulele, right?

But am I saving up treasure for God?

That’s a harder question. A good deal of my music goes to celebrate God and God’s world. A good deal of my photography serves to renew my spirit and, I hope, that of some others. That’s worth while, I think. But am I saving up treasure towards God?

God and I are still working that one out.

It is certainly true that added wealth makes this relationship with God and gold harder. Dan Clendenin quotes and echoes the fourth century Bishop John Cassian at JourneyWithJesus.net, writing, “‘When money increases,’ observed John Cassian (b. 360), ‘the frenzy of covetousness intensifies.’ Greed is insatiable: ‘It always wants more than a person can accumulate.’”

It would be so much easier if there were a magic threshold at which I didn’t have to work out my relationship between me, money, and God. Then I could just gaze at the wealthy with sympathy for their dilemma, one which doesn’t trouble me. But I can’t. That younger son who asked the question of Jesus probably wasn’t due to inherit much. Jesus didn’t spend much time

with the wealthy; there weren't many wealthy people in first century Judean villages. Any of us can get stuck on money, whatever the quantity is.

According to Jesus, no amount of money is worth anything.

Best to build up riches with God. As Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org, "Being rich toward God means loving God, neighbor, and self. The inheritance offered shares God's abundance and flourishing as all needs are met—material, physical, social, spiritual, mental, and emotional. Being rich toward God prioritizes the status of the soul over the balances in financial accounts. Being rich toward God positions us for peace and joy."

Love. Abundance. Flourishing. Met needs. A secure soul. Peace. Joy. In the end – and even along the way – those are better riches than money any day.

Unlike the riches in the big barns, you can take those with you.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson