

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

July 31, 2022

---

## Just a little bit more...

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Get ready, we're going to talk about something that makes most American Christians uncomfortable: wealth. There's a reason society tells us we're not supposed to talk about money in "polite" company...it makes us squirm! But here's the thing, Jesus talked about wealth (and greed) quite a bit in his preaching and teaching. As a matter of fact, he taught on the topic of wealth more than he taught about prayer! There are 67 references to wealth and money in the teachings of Jesus in the four Gospels, and 60 references to prayer. If Jesus talked about money and wealth that much, then Christians need to pay attention to the topic! And we need to be willing to talk about it too!

There is an apocryphal anecdote that claims a reporter once asked John D. Rockefeller, at the peak of his wealth, how much money was enough. The story goes that his answer was, "just a little bit more." There is no evidence that this ever actually occurred, but my experience of humanity's relationship with wealth leads me to think it absolutely could be true. We humans often seem to be chasing after "just a little bit more." Just a little bit more wealth...more power...more popularity...more pleasure...more sex...more, more, more.

Why? Why are we always chasing more? What's the deeper thing behind all this greed? Let's take a look in the mirror and explore this broken part of our nature. There are likely a variety of reasons behind this covetousness. But I think there are some deep roots that it shares across humanity.

For many, I believe, it boils down to insecurity and a desire for control. I certainly think we see those elements at work in the gospel text for today. This section is kicked off with someone wanting Jesus to be arbiter in an inheritance dispute, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance

with me."<sup>1</sup> This seems reasonable on its face, right? This man is seeking what is his by right, he wants his "fair share." But what might be going on deeper here?

Why has it gotten to the point of conflict between this man and his brother? Does this man believe there is simply not enough inheritance to go around? Is he trapped in the insecurity of scarcity thinking? Is he worried he won't have "enough"? And what sort of attitude is at work deeper down? An inheritance is a gift, why does he feel the need to control how the gift has been allocated? I also wonder how this desire for just a little bit more inheritance has affected his relationship with his brother. Has his brother now become an opponent? A defendant in a lawsuit? Is his brother now an obstacle that is in the way of his "little bit more"? Can he see his brother as a brother anymore? Do you think this is what his parents envisioned when they left this gift of an inheritance?

Jesus shuts this man down and pivots to a remarkably deep parable of a "successful" landowner. There's a lot to delve into in this short teaching. First, we may be tempted again to think there's a reasonable explanation to the rich man's view, just like the man who sought arbitration. "Fairness" is reasonable after all, and so too is planning ahead for your retirement, right? And that seems to be what the rich man is doing. He's had some good years, so why not relax, and enjoy what he has?

Jesus presents this as unreasonable from his point of view. In the parable God calls the rich man a fool and points out that none of what he has stored up will matter in the end. His life is being demanded of him that very night and all that he has will no longer be his...almost as if it wasn't really his to begin with. Remember how this chapter started, Jesus teaching the disciples to pray...and to pray an acknowledgement that daily bread comes from God. All that we have, ultimately, comes from God. Perhaps that ought to mean something more than trusting in God's providence. Perhaps that means asking ourselves how God might want us to use what God has given us. And I doubt it's to retire in luxury...

Second, notice the pronoun usage in the parable...it's all first person singular...I, I, I, me, me, me, mine, mine, mine. The rich man even addresses his own soul in verse 19! Talk about narcissism! Such an inwardly turned soul will rarely know the deep love and connection that comes from relationship

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:13b (NRSV)

with God and with neighbor. It's self-isolation of the most painful sort, and one often lived out in obliviousness to deeper meaning and living.

Third, what's the rich man's end goal in all of this? Merriment! Pleasure! Now don't get me wrong, merriment and pleasure are good things, but should they be our aim? I don't think God wants that for us. Mostly because the sorts of merriment and pleasure that we too often pursue are ultimately unfulfilling and can even be detrimental to the life God made us for! Merriment and pleasure found in the midst of loving connection and community is one thing, hedonistic pleasure, seeking only to satisfy our basest cravings, is quite another! I think that's part of the reason behind the last line of God's address to the rich man, "**whose** will [your treasurers] be?" What sort of connections and community do you think this rich man has? Deep and meaningful ones? Or the shallow sort that often seem to accompany the pursuit of wealth. A pursuit that often sees everyone else as a competitor or opponent. All his treasure will go to someone else, someone he may have the weakest sort of connection to.

Jesus ends this teaching with the choice humanity has as he sees it. Store up treasures for yourself that will ultimately not fulfill you or attend to your relationship with God that will fulfill. Be turned inward, focusing on your own pleasure, or be turned outward, focused on the deep joy found in connection and community. Pursue your desires and will and ultimately be empty or pursue the life God made you for and find wholeness.

This is a hard teaching, one that should make us uncomfortable. And in the end, it's the same teaching I lifted up last week too: pursue God's will...God's kingdom, NOT YOUR OWN! Stop pursuing wealth and power and stop seeking to control the world around you through those means. Stop viewing your neighbors as competitors for limited resources and find the joy of sharing the abundance that God provides. Stop being enthralled to ego, pleasure, and wealth and live as God made you to live: simply and in connection and community. Live as though you have been freed from these temporary and unfulfilling things because you have!

What we all need just a little bit more of is love...grace...compassion... kindness...community...connection. I suspect if more of us lived this way, pursuing God's will for the world, there would be far less hunger, far less poverty, far less violence in the world. Who knows, the world might even start to look like God's kingdom come, on earth as in heaven. Amen.