



# True Riches

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 12:13-21

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As I was reflecting on our passage, I remembered my favorite movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, because Mr. Potter is an example of a rich fool who lives for himself. He focuses on money and possessions and getting more of it any way he can, even if it means using or hurting other people. Except for his servant, he is utterly isolated and alone. Though he is the richest man in town, he is always depicted in a wheelchair as a symbol that he is crippled by his wrong beliefs about himself in relationship to money, success, and security.

George Bailey is a contrast to him. He continually sacrifices his desires and dreams for the life he wanted in order to love those around him—his family, friends, and neighbors. But George struggles too, feeling bitter, resentful, and even depressed because he believes that he's missed out on life, doesn't have enough money, and is a failure.

Potter's perspective never changes, but the movie is really the story of George's transformation as he comes to understand that he has had a wonderful life. At the end of the movie, the townspeople come together to give George money to help him in his time of crisis. His war-hero brother arrives to give a toast: "To my big brother George—the richest man in town." Clarence the angel leaves a note saying, "Remember, no man is a failure who has friends." George finally understands and believes that true riches are not found in money or possessions but in relationships.

I love that movie because it challenges us to think about our own lives. And that is the point of the parable Jesus shares as well. It holds us to a mirror before us and asks us to take a good look at our own inner lives and pay attention to

what we really believe about ourselves in relationship to money and wealth. What matters most to me? What do I believe are my true riches? What am I living for? Dallas Willard explains that “We reveal what our true riches are [what matters most to us] by what we protect, secure, keep.” Jesus makes it clear from the very beginning that that’s point he wants to drive home. True riches are not to be valued or measured in terms of wealth or possessions. True riches are found in God and His kingdom.

For years I didn’t think this parable really applied to me because I never thought of myself as rich. When I was very young, I had the sense it was challenging for my parents to make ends meet, and I think that influenced me to think we might not have enough. But the truth was we always had a roof over our heads and food on the table. We had everything we needed and much of what we wanted. As I got older, there was even more to be enjoyed. I now understand that in comparison to most people in the world, I am very rich indeed.

No matter who we are or how much money or wealth we have, we are all engaged in handling money, making purchases, owning possessions. What we do and how we do it is driven by beliefs that can be traced to our early (often childhood) experiences regarding material wealth. Once these beliefs are stored in our minds, they can stay largely unchallenged until we die. And here is the main point: These beliefs are running (and in some cases ruining) our lives. The whole purpose of Jesus’ parable is for us to examine how our beliefs are driving our behavior in relationship to money and possessions. So let’s unpack it.

The rich man’s problem in the parable is not having the wealth nor even how he acquired it. He happened to have a

good year, and now he has to figure out what to do with the abundance. He asks himself a question and then answers it.

“‘What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?’ Then he said, ‘*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.’” The issue is not how much he has but his insistence on gathering all of it for himself.

Notice the focus on me, myself, and I revealing the problem of self-sufficiency. The rich fool reflects the belief: “It’s all about me.” There is no reference to anyone else—no family, no friends, no community. There is absolutely no awareness, interest, or concern or sense of responsibility for anyone else but himself. He truly is like Potter.

But the biggest problem is that there is no mention of God, which is why he is deemed a fool. Psalm 14:1 says, “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’” But there *is* a God and, last week, Pete shared Treasure Principle #1: God owns everything. I’m his money manager.

Like Pete, I, too, went into campus ministry after college and had to raise my own support. But I learned a really important life lesson during that time. Every two weeks, I received a blue envelope with my paycheck, reminding me that the money I had was not the result of my accomplishments or achievements. It was about God and His grace working in my life and through the lives of others who gave generously to be a part of God’s ministry with college students.

It’s still true not only for me but for you, too. Your paycheck may come from the government, school district, a law firm, or some other company, but it’s not about us or what we have done. It’s still about God and His grace

directing money to us. God owns everything. I'm His money manager.

Now, let's look at the parable again. "What should I do, for I have no *place* to store my *crops*?" Then he said, "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*."

Notice that the highlights illustrate the problem of preoccupation with possessions. This reflects the belief that my value, security, importance, and happiness is found in what I have. The rich man's goods and prosperity have become the sole pursuit of his life until finally the poverty of his abundance is exposed. Last week, we learned Treasure Principle #2: My heart always goes to where I put God's money.

The rich fool illustrates the current cultural values. If we look good, drive a nice car, have a certain kind of house, and have a lot of money, then we have made it. This deception has been perpetrated in all ages, including in Jesus' day when acquiring wealth was viewed as a sign of blessing and even salvation.

In 1 Timothy 6:10 we read, "For the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their *eagerness to be rich* some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." Again, money is not the problem. It's our *orientation* toward money and possessions that matters. When we look to stuff to give us a sense of significance or security, then we allow money to become a magnet that pulls us away from true identity in Christ and the priorities of the kingdom, and that is when life begins to get out of kilter.

A lot of money is spent in advertisements because companies know how to play on our false beliefs, distorted desires, and even fears. Whatever the product, we are made to feel we will be less safe, less beautiful, less happy, less free, less in control of our lives if we don't have that product. But here's the thing: preoccupation with possessions is a very weak substitute for the sort of things we need to build our lives around.

And it leads to the next problem: grasping for greed. Greed is a selfish desire to have more of something. The basic belief is the *more* I have, the happier I will be. It doesn't even cross the rich fool's mind that he might give some of his excess crops to those in need. Instead, his musings lead to a solution of tearing down barns and building bigger ones so he can have more, more, more.

When I was a college student, I remember hearing the story about a reporter asking John D. Rockefeller, the wealthiest man in the world, how much money it would take to make him happy. Rockefeller famously said, "Just a little more."

It's a good question for all of us. How much money would make you happy?

This is a good place to point out that "Both the stingy and the spendthrift can be in the grip of greed. Though they appear to be opposites, they share the same belief: money (spent or saved) is what makes a person happy" (James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life*).

We're being shaped by our culture, media, and many other messages to believe we need more. We're all familiar with the bumper sticker, "He who dies with the most toys wins." But it's not true. He who dies with the most toys still dies—



and never takes his toys with him. If we buy into the false belief that happiness is about getting more, then we don't win—we lose.

The issue here is the heart, and the fool's next words reveal his heart has been corrupted by wealth: "And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

Here we see two more problems. He is buying into a hedonistic belief: Pleasure is the highest good and proper aim of human life. The rich fool revels in his prosperity and daydreams of spending his future indulging his whims and desires. Leisure, recreation, freedom from the demands of work are finally his. It sounds very much like our culture's picture of retirement. Being free from the demands of work is not bad, but for what?

Please understand that our souls are created to crave and to experience pleasure. The soul needs satisfaction, but it will never be found in money, or things money can buy, or pursuing pleasure. As John Ortberg says in *Soul Keeping*, "Soul-satisfaction is not about acquiring the right things; it's about acquiring the right soul. It is not something you buy, but something you receive freely from God."

Another problem with the rich fool is that he thinks he's a self-made man, but he is actually a very short-sighted man. He is living according to a wrong belief: By storing up wealth, possessions, money, I can secure or control my future.

But God stops him to speak and declare what the future actually holds for him: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have

prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’”

This parable reminds us that we are mortal. We don’t know the future. We’re not called to know the future. We’re called to trust the one who does. Again, the parable challenges us to look in the mirror and ask ourselves: “What matters most to me? What do I believe are my true riches? What am I living for?”

As Willard says, “We reveal what our true riches are [what matters most to us] by what we protect, secure, keep.”

The parable invites us to turn away from foolish living according to the world’s values and to be rich toward God. That’s what Treasure Principle #3 is all about: Heaven, not earth, is our home. Heaven is often thought of as a distant place in the distant future, but it’s not. Jesus began his ministry saying, “The time is fulfilled, and *the kingdom of God* has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15).

Richard Foster makes clear what is meant by the good news: “It is very simply, that people—all people—can enter into a living and abundant life with God in his kingdom of love now, and that this reality will continue on, and indeed intensify, after death.... The good news is that in Jesus himself the way has been opened for you and for me to come freely into God’s great kingdom of love.”



We are called to a new direction—to live in the kingdom of God which begins now and lasts forever. This is



Treasure Principle #4: I should live not for the dot but for the line.

As Randy Alcorn says in his book, we can think of our lives in terms of two phases: one phase is the dot which represents our life on earth. It begins. It ends. It is brief. But from that dot extends a line that goes on forever. That line is eternity. Right now we are living *in* the dot. But what are we living for? If we are wise, we will live for the line. This doesn't mean that our life here, our material bodies, our material possessions are unimportant. What it does mean is "True riches are enjoyed by living an abundant life with God in his kingdom of love." We live in the kingdom now in ways that will matter for eternity.

But what does that really look like? I want to give some practical suggestions taken from 1 Timothy 6. I hope you will look at the passage later as it offers the antithesis of the rich fool.

Life in the kingdom reflects contentment—to be happy and satisfied with what one has. Contentment means we put our trust and confidence in God—not in what we have, what we can do, what other people think of us.

1 Timothy makes clear that we, as humans, have real material needs, and God wants us to have adequate material provision for ourselves and our families, including a place to live, food and clothing. In our day, we might also include insurance, college education for our children, a car, even some money for recreation and vacations. There is no conflict in the kingdom of God with having a comfortable life. We don't have to feel guilty about that.

But how much do we really need? The credit card debt in our country reflects deep discontent as people buy more than

they can afford. Contentment is rooted in our beliefs. I can be satisfied with what I have when I believe God is good and loving and that he will provide and care for me as his beloved child, then I can rest in him and relax and enjoy what I have no matter what circumstances I find myself in.

Life in the kingdom reflects simplicity. According to Richard Foster, “Simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle.” It must first be an inward reality because it involves adopting the right beliefs about God, ourselves, and money or wealth. Once we have the inward reality in place, we can make our outward, lifestyle decisions. Asking these questions can help us:

- Do I really need this?
- Will it bring me kingdom joy (and not merely temporary happiness)?
- How much of the money I would spend on this item can I free up to invest in heavenly treasures?

What is important is that we follow the lead of the Spirit and make informed choices about our resources in light of the kingdom.

Simplicity cultivates the great art of letting go as it aims at loosening inordinate attachment to owning and having. There is a sense of freedom. I can enjoy the material world and God’s gifts as He gives, but I do not need them for my happiness or wellbeing. “I can admire but not acquire.”

Life in the kingdom reflects generosity. Generosity is considered the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly (time, talent, and treasures).

In one of his teachings, Dallas Willard makes the point that pastors are often hesitant to talk about money because

hearers will think they want more money. I can't speak for other pastors, but I confess it's true for me. Last week, Pete said he has preached countless sermons on generosity. This is my first one. But Willard has helped me, because he insists that the real need is not more money. The need is to give. God has got all the money He will ever have any use for. The question is what will it be used for?

Do we as followers of Christ understand that we are now in a different order, the order of the kingdom of God? And it is not one that we have to take care of ourselves.

Generous people don't keep count or track things; they just give freely and abundantly and are thrilled to do so. They are overflowing with a feeling of joy and thankfulness because they are in the flow of the kingdom giving as their heavenly Father has given to them.

It's time to assess what we believe about true riches. God wants us to be free from false beliefs about material wealth. He wants us to believe that true riches are enjoyed by living an abundant life with God in His kingdom—now and forever. In relationship to money and every other matter, we are Becoming Like Christ Together for the World. God wants us to become like Him so that we are free to live for Him, for others, and kingdom purposes in the world. That, my friends, is a wonderful life.