



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Luke 12:13-21

Background of the reading

The context for the reading today is again totally different from our views on inheritance, being rich or poor. Let me explain:

We live in a world of abundance. In our world there are big differences between rich and poor people. It also seems as if some people get even richer by the minute! In our economics we make the assumption that goods are in principal in unlimited supply. If there is a shortage of some kind we just produce more of what is needed. If one person gets more of something it does not necessarily imply that someone else gets less!

In biblical times it was a totally different story. All goods were in limited finite supply and were already distributed to the various families. This included everything and not just material goods like friendship, honour, love status and security. Because the “pie” could not grow larger a larger piece for anyone automatically meant a smaller piece for someone else. Someone who was honourable would therefore not take anything that did not belong to them. An honourable man would have no desire to acquire or gain anything which was another’s. Acquisition was by its very nature understood as stealing. In the ancient Mediterranean world existed an attitude that “every rich person is either unjust or the heir of an unjust person”. Profit making and the acquisition of goods and wealth were automatically assumed to be the result of extortion or fraud and the notion of an honest rich man was a first century oxymoron like in our day of a “legal murder or wise fool”!

The label being rich meant something else in the biblical context. It was a moral, social and economic statement of someone who stole from someone weaker what was not rightfully theirs. It was synonymous with

being greedy! At the same time someone who was poor meant that they were unable to keep or defend their right to keep what belonged to them. It meant falling below the status at which one was born. Being poor was to be defenceless without any other choice.

It is in this context that Jesus reacts to the question of someone who felt that he was deprived of something that did not belong to him. In Judaism the oldest son always inherited a double portion from the father's inheritance. It was up to him to use it in whatever way he wanted. This man was indeed "greedy" but could not hide it from Jesus. He most probably wanted some of the double portion!

He also did what most people did in those days taking any issue they had to the rabbis. Jesus wants to help him to understand his own greed and to realize there are things that matter more than wealth. It is then in this context and from this point of view that we must understand this parable. When Jesus speaks about the rich person he means someone who stole from someone else! It is also evident that this man is not portrayed in a very positive way. It seems clear that he was only thinking of himself and did not care about any other. Repeatedly he says: I will do this and I will do that without realizing that there is someone in heaven who is in power!

His attitude is quite similar to the fool of the wisdom context of the Old Testament. The Epicurean – a footnote, a philosophical attitude where pleasure was seen as the utmost desire of every human being - complacency of the man who would "eat, drink and be merry" probably refers to the analogous folly of well-to-do Jews in Isaiah 22:13–14. It was the best that mortal life itself could offer a person, but one needed also to consider God's demands. Many other Jewish texts also criticise the self-sufficient person who thinks that he or she has it all and does not reckon with death.

I think it is then in this context that the rich man in the parable is indeed a fool for not realizing that God is in control of everything – life and death!

Reflection and meaning of the reading

¹⁷ *He thought to himself, What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'*

¹⁸ *"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"*

Someone made a very witty remark in the week when I said I am going to preach on the parable of the rich fool by saying: “The rich fool, poor idiot!”

I think these four words sum it all up. The rich fool thought he had it all but indeed missed the whole point of life. He was indeed very “poor” in his understanding of life. His greedy character can be clearly seen. Instead of acquiring wealth for the benefit of the poor and to the glory of God, he just wanted to enrich himself by “stealing” from someone else. He did not think of God who indeed saw his greed. In the parable God does not give him much time to correct his ways.

Jesus says this outcome could have been prevented if the rich man was indeed “rich toward God”, meaning if he was thinking of the treasure of heaven, if he was focusing on the eternal riches that cannot be bought by wealth. It cannot be earned by good deeds or any human effort. Salvation is by grace alone, and human merit has no standing before God; however, God grants rewards to those who serve him.

The message is clear: the rich man in the parable actually owned nothing. His life and everything he had was a gracious loan by God and something that could be suspended in any point of time. But the gospel offers a solution to the problem of greed.

Give to those in need. One can avoid becoming a slave to possessions by recognizing their temporary quality. Jesus is telling us to order our lives in accordance with the one thing that is eternal—God. It is indeed as the Old Testament says it is the fool, who says in his heart, “There is no God.”

And I think this is also a timely message for us. We can so easily be lured in to believing that material things can make us happy. We can so easily forget that God is in charge of all things and that everything comes from his fatherly hand out of love. Nothing belongs to us. Everything is indeed God’s. We received a huge “mortgage” from God free of charge! We do not have to repay God. We do not have to do something extraordinary to enter into his kingdom. He already did everything for us. He only expects us to live our lives like people who are eternally grateful, who take nothing for granted but glorifies Him for everything that is being received, who focuses on Him and put him first in everything. It is only through faith in him that we can enter his eternal kingdom. And what is faith? True faith is not only a knowledge and

conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God and have been granted salvation.

May we never ever forget who we are and where our true destinies are?
Amen