

Risky and Rich

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¹³ Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus,] “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴ But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷ And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Wealth isn't inherently bad. But when we trust in our material possessions for our identity, self-worth, our relationships; that is misplaced trust. God calls us to trust in Him for all those things. We do that through Word, worship, prayer, community, encouragement of fellow Christians.

Mark and Susan own farmland in South Dakota. Every spring, Mark goes out to plant the corn. He watches the weather all summer. Several years ago, they had to build a larger barn to store all the equipment. The discs, the combines, the tractors and dumps to carry the corn from the fields to the grain bins in town. Mark and Susan have so much money tied into equipment needed for the business of farming. Yet, they watch the market closely. Corn prices go up. Corn prices go down. The cash in the bank for food and medical bills is quite small compared to the cash tied up in costly equipment. It's a risky business, farming. Risky.

Steve's dad was in the stock market business. While growing up Steve watched his dad. The worry on his face at the dinner table after a bad day on Wall Street. The relief when the clients were doing well. Dad taught Steve the tricks of the trade and eventually Steve took over the business. It's a risky business, the stock market. Risky.

George and Anna had their own small store. They sold mostly dry and canned grocery items. But at Christmas time, Anna like to order a few things that people

could buy as gifts. Then there were small sachets of lavender for dresser drawers, and some toys for the children. As with all retailers, George and Anna spent long hours at the store. Their own children learned to play quietly in the back when customers came in. But when the store was empty and they had some cash at the end of the month, George allowed that the kids could split a chocolate bar to share. Their mobile trailer and its contents was all the couple had besides the inventory in the store. It was a risky business; grocery. Risky.

All of these good folks: Mark and Susan, Steve, George and Anna have worked hard for their livings. They have done nothing wrong. Like the farmer in the parable, none of them have gotten their income illegally. They haven't tried to manipulate their goods to get a higher profit margin. All of them are trying to make a living for themselves and their families.

So what was it exactly that the farmer did, by which he had to die on the eve of a lovely retirement in which he could have had quite enough to live comfortably for a long, long time. What did he do wrong? Nothing wrong with having a good year. Nothing wrong with storing his grain safely to protect it from drought.

Did your parents talk to you about money when you were growing up? Did they teach you the value of a hard-earned dollar? Did you talk about the ethics of money and how to spend it or save it? It may vary from generation to generation. I remember my grandmother. She said it was a good week if she and grampa had one thin dime left. And my mother talked about planting victory gardens during the war. Now most people have some retirement saved up, and all wished they had.

Times are different. Many young people are graduating college and only a few years later landing jobs in the six figures. And many young people can't afford college because they have to choose between buying food or buying medicine for the baby. Not enough money makes people unhappy. Too much money makes people unhappy. What to do?

The only hint in Jesus' story is that God calls the farmer a fool. The fool is language from wisdom literature in the Old Testament. It is the same as vanity. To be vane and foolish is to be like the smoke from a cigarette. One cannot catch it, or hold onto it, or contain it. Smoke vanishes into thin air. The farmer is foolish in his thinking about money.

Tracy Chapman wrote a song called "Mountains o' Things". The lyrics go like this:

[Verse 1]

The life I've always wanted
I guess I'll never have
I'll be working for somebody else
Until I'm in my grave
I'll be dreaming of a life of ease
And mountains oh mountains o' things

[Verse 2]

To have a big expensive car
Drag my furs on the ground
And have a maid that I can tell
To bring me anything
Everyone will look at me with envy and with greed
I'll revel in their attention
And mountains oh mountains o' things

[Verse 3]

Sweet lazy life
Champagne and caviar
I hope you'll come and find me
Cause you know who we are
Those who deserve the best in life
And know what money's worth
And those whose sole misfortune
Was having mountains of nothing at birth

[Verse 4]

Consume more than you need
This is the dream
Make you pauper
Or make you queen
I won't die lonely
I'll have it all prearranged
A grave that's deep and wide enough
For me and all my mountains o' thingsⁱ

'I won't die lonely. I'll have it all prearranged. A grave that's deep and wide enough for me and all my mountains o' things.'

Our lives – humans lives are inherently fragile. It only takes one move of the Feds on interest rates, or one visit to the doctor, or one divorce, or one lost job to feel that we are not in control. We are not all powerful. We are insignificant. Which is one reason, that all of us buy into the cultural message that our ‘stuff’ makes us who we are! Our material items, our savings accounts, our 401(k), can somehow protect us from all the ills the world will throw at us. Or if not, well then some good ole’ shopping therapy will do the trick instead.

Let’s remember for a moment that Jesus was poor. That was His station in life. Jesus was poor; a carpenter’s son. Poor people know how to trust in ways those of us with more, may find it hard to trust.

Case in point. What Jesus says right after this story, is...

He continued this subject with his disciples. “Don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or if the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more.

²⁹⁻³² “What I’m trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with *getting* so you can respond to God’s *giving*. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. (from The Message Translation)

The difference between risky and rich is who and what we trust! God created we fragile humans. Therefore, God also knows what we need. There is no more controlling the stock market than trying to make the sun not rise. We cannot do it. It’s foolish and wasted energy to check our bank accounts fifteen times a day. That energy will be better spent checking our Bibles or lifting our minds in prayer fifteen times a day.

The foolishness of the farmer was that he trusted his wealth for his security, his identity, his relationships, his everything. He wasn’t rich, as he didn’t invite or include God in any of his life.

We are rich in God right now. In worship. In community. In prayer. In encouragement and fellowship with other Christians. That is our life in Christ. And it provides more wealth than we can ever expect to have or own. God sees

what we need and provides for us. Maybe it's a little money...maybe it's a great deal of money. Yet what God truly provides is richness in our inner lives. We know who we are and whose we are. We know God's grace and forgiveness. Who doesn't need that every day? We can spend our lives plumbing the depths of the Word. We have a relationship with Jesus that will retain its strength more than the dollar any day of the week and twice on Sundays.

Although Mark and Susan, Steve, George and Anna didn't know one another; they all had one thing in common. They all recognized that everything they had and everything they owned and everything that reached their dinner tables came from God. When they bowed heads with their children at night, they all prayed the same prayer. "Thank you, God for the gifts we have received from you. Our health, our wealth, our food, our lives and one another. Let them be a witness of your love and grace each day, that others might know you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

ⁱ Tracy Chapman. Album 1988. Los Angeles, CA. Track six. Mountains o' Things.