PARABLES

The Rich Fool

Luke 12:13-21

Introduction

In the classical world of Greek philosophy there was a clear division between body and soul, but this division was foreign to the Semitic mind. The Hebrew word for 'self' – the whole person – is *'nepes'* (very similar to the Arabic *'nefsh'*). So in Semitic thinking the whole person is an indissoluble composite of body, mind and spirit. We can see a clear example of this when Paul is speaking of the Resurrection. He includes the resurrection of the body which he goes on to define as 'a spiritual body'. (1 Cor. 15:44)

The implication of this is that there is no 'spiritual Gospel' that is somehow isolated from the reality of the physical world that God is created and all of which God said was 'good' – fit for purpose – and into which He placed human beings. The combination of the spiritual and the physical and its relationship to God is at the heart of the teachings of the Lord Jesus. For example, in the Lord's Prayer there was a request for the gift of bread.

In regard to material things, the Lord Jesus said more about money than He did about prayer! Whenever He discussed money, He did so with the assumption that all material things belong to God.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." (Ps. 24:1)

"For every beast of the forest is Mine and the cattle on a thousand hills …." (Ps. 50:10)

Does this mean that the right to private property is denied?

Biblically, we are stewards of all our possessions and responsible to God for what we do with them. But at the same time the New Testament affirms the legitimacy of private property. When Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, it was because they had falsely claimed they had given their entire property price to God when they hadn't done so. Their sin was that false claim not their possession of property. All believers everywhere are called to be stewards of their own property and indeed much more – stewards of the whole earth!

The Text of the Parable

v. 13	***"Someone in the crowd said to Him 'Teacher tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me' ".***	SETTING
v. 14	***"But He said to him, 'Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?' "***	A GENERAL PRINCIPLE
v. 15	***"And He said to them, 'Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' ".***	
v. 16	***And He told them a parable saying, The land of a rich man produced plentifully***	GOODS GIVEN TO HIM
v. 17	***And he thought to himself, 'What shall I do for I have nowhere to store my crops?***	DIALOGUE WITH SELF (my crop – not stored)

v. 18	***And he said, 'I will do this:*** ***I will tear down my barns and build larger ones*** ***and there I will store all my grain and my goods'.***	SOLUTION (?) PRESENT (more storage)
v. 19	***And I will say to myself, 'Self!*** ***You have ample goods laid up for many years;*** ***relax, eat, drink and be merry!'***	DIALOGUE WITH SELF PLAN FUTURE (crop stored)
v. 20	***But God said to him, 'Fool! This night*** ***your soul is required of you and the things*** ***you have prepared, whose will they be?'***	GOODS LEFT BY HIM
v. 21	***So is the one who lays up treasure for himself*** ***and is not rich towards God."***	A GENERAL PRINCIPLE

The Structure of the Parable

The overall literary form of the parable is simple and clear. It begins with a single exchange between the Lord Jesus and an anonymous petitioner that takes the form of a demand and a response.

The general principle opens in v. 14 and it ends with a second principle in v. 21. They form the outer envelope of the story. Then there is a second theme – goods given (v. 16) and goods left behind (v. 20). The inner part has two dialogues that the rich man has with himself. The subject of the dialogues is the storing of all his goods – v. 17 and v. 19.

The crux of the story is v. 18 which shows his awareness self and all his possessions – my barns, my grain, my goods, my security. He planned to expand his storage in order to preserve the crop and give himself security.

The Interpretation

Luke translates the Aramaic word 'Rabbi' as 'teacher'. The men in the crowd address the Lord Jesus as if he were speaking to a legal expert. Note what he does not say. *"Rabbi Jesus, my brother and I are in dispute. I am sad lest this dispute creates a complete breakdown in our relationship. I am very concerned about this. Would you listen to him and to me and reconcile us? I beg you, please bring us together."*

No! In effect he says, *"Tell my brother that he is completely wrong and I am right and he should give me my rights."* Clearly this demand means there had already been a complete separation between the brothers.

Possibly this is what might have happened. Their father had died without leaving either an oral or a written will. The estate was held by the two brothers. According to the laws of the time, the inheritance couldn't be divided until the older brother agreed (the double portion of the eldest). So this petitioner must be the younger brother who now orders the Lord Jesus to force the older brother into agreeing the division. Clearly the older brother didn't want this to happen.

This is an important matter. Justice is a critical part of life. So this petitioner cries out for justice in the division of land. This sort of issue is a highly divisive issue in families.

Psalm 133:1 reflects on how good it is when the sons managed to cooperate harmoniously in such a situation. ***"To dwell together"*** implies to manage to co-operate agreeably in the situation. Abraham found it difficult with lot. (Gen. 13:5-7) and in Luke 16:9 there is a poor servant in a dilemma in a household where the father dies and the servant has two masters who don't agree.

But the Lord Jesus is a reconciler of people not a divider. He wants to bring people – and especially families – together and never divide them into finalised separations. The Lord Jesus is never indifferent to our cries for justice. By His parables and by His miracles He demonstrated His compassion for the oppressed, the outcasts and the falsely accused. He clearly had an immense concern for social justice (see Lk. 4:16-30. This parable is about material possessions, social justice and God.

Judging the cause of Justice

For the Lord Jesus, "the cause" of the injustice must also come under judgement. All human causes are ambiguous and all human actions are somewhat polluted by our egotism. God is shown in the Bible as a God of justice and so we to need to be committed to justice in society and justice in giving to each person what he/she is due. Many Biblical writers from Amos onwards speak much of God's concern for justice.

Luke, more than the other three Gospel writers, has much more emphasis on justice and a concern for the poor and downtrodden.

- Mary expresses joy at the exaltation of those of low degree. (Lk. 1:52)
- The parables of the Great Banquet and Lazarus and the Rich Man

But our problem is that each one of us overestimates what is due to me compared to what is due to my neighbour!

In the Middle East over the last hundred years many communities have struggled to get some form of justice – i.e. the Palestinian/Israeli issue. So often each community expresses an overwhelming sense of self-righteousness in their cause. But in general they acknowledge no justice that will judge objectively their cause against their opponents.

Habakkuk prophesied the coming of the Chaldeans in an invasion of Judah. One of the very frightening things he said of them was, ***"Their justice goes forth from themselves."*** (Hab. 1:7). There was no objectivity in their terrifying 'justice' with all its cruelty. They didn't believe in a God of justice who would judge them for their thoughts and actions.

There is another problem of internal inconsistency in our lives. We will fight for a just cause (which may well be true), but that should not allow us to think that we are 'just' people all areas of our lives. The way we fight for our cause may be very unjust. It is sad to observe those who have created a sense of justice with no external, objective criteria of justice.

This parable presents a very different perspective on our cries for justice. For clearly the petitioner has already decided what justice requires and wants this wondering, famous young Rabbi to enforce his own view in public. So perhaps this greedy petitioner wants the Lord Jesus to tell his brother to hand over the property – i.e. order his brother to carry out his wishes. So he is trying to use the Lord Jesus!

Here we are dealing with the Middle East's most sensitive and pressing problem – the cry for justice over the division of the land! It takes a special brand of courage to tell two opposing antagonists that their naked cry for justice is not enough and they must begin with a totally new understanding of themselves. The Lord Jesus was frequently in this situation – see Lk. 12:13 and 13:1-3. In each case the Lord Jesus is saying, 'Look at yourself first'!

The answer the Lord Jesus gives to this petitioner has a tone of disapproval. In colloquial Arabic to address somebody as, *'ya ragul'* ('o man') is a very clear indicator that you disapprove of him! Moses sought to be a judge and was rebuffed (Ex. 2:14). The Lord Jesus refuses to be a judge and rebuffs the petitioner.

So we are called not to be 'judges', but to reconcile people and nations to one another. In order for reconciliation, the two parties – and especially the petitioner – need to gain a new perspective of themselves.

The First Great Principal

"Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

In Greek there is an overtone of insatiable desire that makes the warning very strong. The clear implication is that the petitioner will not have solved his problem even if his brother does grant him his portion of the inheritance. The Lord Jesus is judging the motives of our hearts not the size of our bank balance! It is true that a certain minimum of material goods is necessary for a healthy life. But it is not true that greater abundance of goods means greater abundance of life.

So the Lord Jesus is giving us two principles and warnings:

- The desire for material things is insatiable.
- The dreams of an abundant life will never be achieved through the accumulation of surpluses.

There is an insatiable desire for a higher standard of living almost everywhere in the world. The fond hope that life (abundant life) will be the product of more consumption is being driven by advertisers and economists. Yet we are all aware that the natural resources of the world are dwindling and the pressure for more possessions is intensifying. Clearly, as followers of the Lord Jesus, we need to act on this message. Note the text ***"He said to them"***. The parable is meant for <u>all</u> not just for the two brothers.

The Parable:

GOODS GIVEN TO HIM

"The land of a rich man produced plentifully." v. 16

The background to this is Psalm 49 that discusses the problem of wealth and its meaninglessness. (See also Eccl. 2:1-11 and Job 31: 24-29.) The important thing is what we do with our money.

Note first that the Lord Jesus is teaching that wealth is a <u>gift</u> from God and is not acquired by human effort. So we have to answer the question, "What do I do with what I haven't earned?" Clearly the rich man in the parable doesn't understand that this is the question!

The Lord Jesus introduces the idea of 'a loan'. The man discovers that his soul is on loan and there is a sense which our wealth is on loan from God. In addition, the rich man's lifestyle results in isolation. At the beginning of the story the rich man was already rich. The method by which he acquired his riches isn't criticised. This man clearly already had enough by now, but through no effort of his own he is given the gift of a bumper crop he didn't earn and doesn't need. His problem is what to do with the unearned surplus?

THE DIALOGUE WITH SELF – THE PROBLEM

"And he thought to himself, 'What shall I do for I have nowhere to store my crops'?" v. 17

He was debating with himself and evidently the debate went on for some time. There was no thought of, 'All this extra wealth is a gift. I really don't need all of it. Who can I give it to?' He refers to it as 'my crops' and his only thought is how do I keep all this? Someone has said that the rich man has plenty of storage available in the mouths of the needy!

Ecclesiastes 5:10 says, ***"He who loves money will not be satisfied with money nor he who loves wealth with gain – this is also vanity."***

How relevant this is in the Western world today with the excess of 'bonuses' in our capitalistic societies or even the surplus value theories in Marxism.

According to Paul a Christian should work for two reasons:

- So he/she would not be a burden on others. (2 Thess. 2:7-12)
- So he/she may be able to give to those in need. (Eph. 4:28)

To explore the meaning of this is beyond the purpose of this study. But it is clearly a question that needs answering in our day.

Note that he has a dialogue with himself. The people of the Middle East both then and now are amazingly gregarious. Life is lived in very close knit communities. The leading men of the village don't anymore sit at the 'gate' of the village but rather in a coffee house in the village centre. Even small issues take hours to discuss. Why is this? Everyone is so much enjoying discussing the issue that no one wants the issue to be settled! In the end, the elder (mayor) makes up his mind in such a way that it is the consensus of the community. Middle Easterners do their thinking in a crowd.

But this man only dialogues with himself. Why is this so? He has no one else with whom to discuss. He trusts no one and has no friends or even family to whom he can refer the issue. He can only talk to himself. So we begin to see the 'prison' that the Lord Jesus pictures as the kind of prison that wealth can build. He has the money to buy a vacuum and live in it. How very sad! Living in a vacuum warps our perspective as we see in his conclusion.

Solution to the problem (in the present)

"I will tear down my barns and build larger ones and there I will store all my grain and my goods." v. 18

"Tearing down" and "building up" are prophetic words that were given to Jeremiah. (See Jer. 1:10) Jeremiah was extraordinarily courageous when speaking prophetically to his people in God's name. This was accompanied by much suffering and a dreadful death. But now this beautiful and courageous man's calling is so cheapened by this self-indulgent man. He lists '<u>my</u> crops', '<u>my</u> barns', '<u>my</u> goods' and finally '<u>my</u> soul'.

Solution to the problem (in the future)

"And I will say to my soul, 'soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years – relax, eat, drink, be merry." v. 19

This isn't a sad thought but it is pitiful! This wealthy self-confident man thinks he has arrived – he has made it! All he has longed for has now been realised. But who is there to rejoice with him? "Who will rejoice with me?"

In Luke 15: the father and the lost son, the shepherd who found the lost sheep and the woman who found her lost coin all had people to rejoice with them over what they had found. In the Middle East gregarious way of life people need community. What about this man! He can only talk to himself!

The Greek word for 'soul' is *'psuche'* and it is translated from the Hebrew *'nefesh'* meaning the whole person. The Arabic is *'nefs'*. So clearly this man thinks that all the needs of his total being can be met with all this material surplus which he can use exclusively for himself!

But into this pleasant reflection comes the thundering voice of God!

His goods (wealth) left

"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" v. 20

There are four words used for 'fool' in the New Testament:

anoētos – mindless

asophpos – without wisdom

moros – fool (from which we get our English word 'moron')

aphron – fool/very stupid

The word *'aphron'* used here is the strongest of the four options. The implication is that the man's formula for the good life is utter sheer stupidity!

The word 'required' is the Greek word most commonly used for the return of a loan. His soul was on loan and then the owner (God) wants the loan returned. So the man's goods were a gift and it is clear that not even his life was his own.

So the voice of God thunders to him after he has built his maximum security storage sheds. It reveals not only that he must die, but also shows clearly the real poverty of his life. He is lonely and friendless in the midst of all his wealth. Now he is confronted with this chilling vision of himself in self-centred isolation. God simply says, "Look at what you have done to yourself! You planned alone, you built alone, you indulged alone and now you will die alone!"

Note that there are no accusing questions such as, "Why did you fail to help those in need?" "Why did you abandon your family?" "What have you done for others?" Perhaps he had developed impregnable armour against just such an attack. The story doesn't tell us that the rich man has no family. Everyone has a family!

What was the rich man's response? We are not told. The rich man's silence leaves us to answer out of our own soul!

The Final General Principle

"So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God." v. 21

There is absolutely no idea in this statement that we can in some way make God rich for God needs nothing. Scripture says, ***"The cattle on a thousand hills are His"***. (Ps. 50:10) So what does the phrase being 'rich towards God' mean? There is nothing we can add to the perfection of God, but throughout the Bible there is the truth that God received gifts from believers. So here the rich fool is characterised as one who is spending his life enriching himself rather than labouring in the service of God so as to offer gifts to God.

There is a parallel teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, ***"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy … but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. … For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"***. (Mt. 6:19-21)

It is a mistake to think that what is being taught here is to put your money in the bank of heaven and you will be able to keep it forever! In a profound sense it is a gift to God. Some translations have 'for God'.

So the First General Principle and the Last General Principle are linked.

1st principle: the surplus of material things

2nd principle: must be spent in offering gifts to God

So gifts from God are to be returned to Him. If you spend energy in enriching yourself with material things, you will impoverish yourself both socially and spiritually and finally destroy yourself. We believers are urged to spend ourselves 'enriching God'.

What was the response of the man and of the whole crowd? Silence!! In response to hearing this story, the rich man was silent and so was the audience. As they pondered the story they should have

seen that **the real problem** is not the division of the inheritance, but a will to serve 'self' rather than to serve God. In this case he would have served God by serving the interests of others – in this case his brother. **The real problem is the same for us today!**

Some theological/moral principles from this parable

1. A naked cry for justice, unqualified by any self-criticism, was not listened to by the Lord Jesus.
2. In the case of a broken personal relationship, Jesus refuses to answer a cry for justice when the answer would contribute to finalising the brokenness of a relationship. He didn't come to be a divider!
3. The parables of the Lord Jesus often reflect a profound concern for the poor. But for the Lord Jesus, justice includes a concern for <u>needs</u> not just earnings – See Mt. 20:1-16. Here a self-centred cry for justice is a symptom of a sickness. Jesus refuses to answer the cry, but rather addresses Himself to healing the sickness that produced the cry.
4. Material possessions are <u>gifts</u> from God and God doesn't grant <u>unearned</u> surpluses of material things. All that we have is on loan. The rich man in the parable assumed he owned both 'my goods' and 'my soul' and that both were to be used for 'my purposes'. The parable says he is wrong in both cases. The rich fool failed to account for his mortality.
5. The person who thinks security and the 'good life' are to be found in material things is a stupid fool! Human life is on loan from God. It is a gift and not a right. The rich man assumed he owned his 'self'. He discovered his mistake when God suddenly asked for the loan of his life to be returned.
6. The 'abundant life' is to be found in <u>storing up treasures for God</u> rather than for self.
7. James 1:1 speaks of ***"a rich man who fades away in the midst of his pursuits"***. The Lord Jesus gives a parabolic picture of precisely this phenomenon. This fools wealth destroyed his capacity to maintain any abiding human relationships. He has no one with whom to share his soul. But much worse, he doesn't even know he has a problem.

A Summary

In our continuing concern to discover the payoffs of material wealth, we need to reflect on this parable given in answer to a petitioner's demand.

This voice from the crowd calls out for justice in the division of his inheritance – almost certainly land. The answer the Lord Jesus gives is to point out a new perspective on the problem itself. He doesn't investigate who is right and who is wrong and then throw His weight on the side of justice. Instead he introduces a new perspective – a theological perspective – the problem itself remains unanswered.

Today two voices cry out in the Middle East for a just division of the land. What answer can we give as believers? We too need to develop a different perspective from the answer that could emerge!

The voice of God 'de-absolutises' material possessions by reminding the rich man that he doesn't know his future nor can he control his future. So the foolish rich man misunderstood the nature of his own life/soul/self. He only saw himself as a body that needed to be fully fed by food and drink.