

God, Man, & MAMMON

Navigating the tension between
the material and the spiritual

Chapter 9



with
Mitch
Anthony

IN THIS ISSUE

MATERIAL MATTERS

With the story of the Rich Fool, Jesus calls us to remember that all our wealth is part of God's "distribution system." Our wealth is not meant for ourselves, but to bless those around us.



RICH TOWARD GOD

Luke 12:13–21 (NIV)

“Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.’ Jesus replied, ‘Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you? Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

”And He told them this parable: ‘The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to him-self, “What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.”’ 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. 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.”’

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God”

MATERIAL MATTERS

Jesus offered this parable of The Rich Fool in response to a man soliciting His assistance toward settling a financial dispute that has arisen over an inheritance. Imagine the awkwardness of this scene where Jesus is teaching a spellbound throng of people on the workings of the kingdom of God and suddenly being interrupted from His profound teaching and miracle-working by a disgruntled heir who wants to get what he thinks he is due. He is present only to seek validation from a respected authority. His obliviousness to the context he is interrupting indicates the distorted sense of proportion that greed had formed in him. In the presence of what was reported to be a divinely inspired event he is asking Jesus to solve a personal monetary dispute. Greed, pettiness, and disproportion had taken hold of this man’s mind. He may have been correct in his claim, but he had become distorted over the matter. Jesus asks (with some perturbation, I imagine), “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”

GREED, PETTINESS

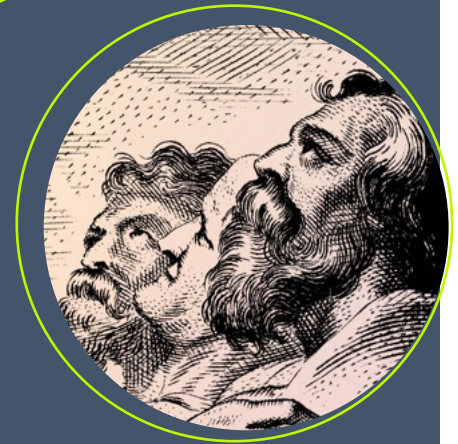
AND

DISPROPORTION

HAD TAKEN HOLD

OF THE RICH

MAN’S MIND.



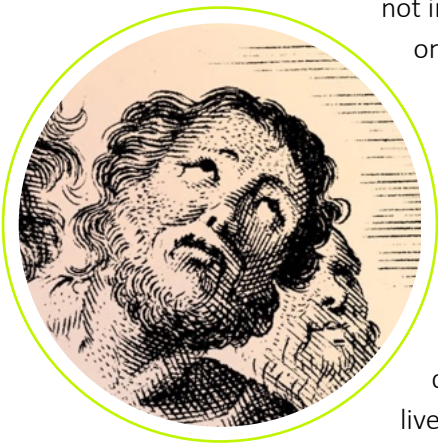
There is irony in Jesus' answer. "Who appointed me to judge?" Will He not judge the living and the dead? Will we not all stand before the judgment seat of Christ? The irony is that He can judge any and every situation. What He is indicating in his response is that he has no interest in judging material disputes rooted in selfish interest. He continues, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Jesus has no interest in the divisive divisions of "stuff" or in monetary squabbles motivated by greed. How many families have been torn apart in their divisions of the belongings of the deceased? Ask an estate-planning attorney and they can tell you stories that will shock your senses. Families are routinely and irrevocably divided posthumously over the flimsiest of possessions because heirs harbored emotional attachments and assigned disproportionate significance to those things.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"

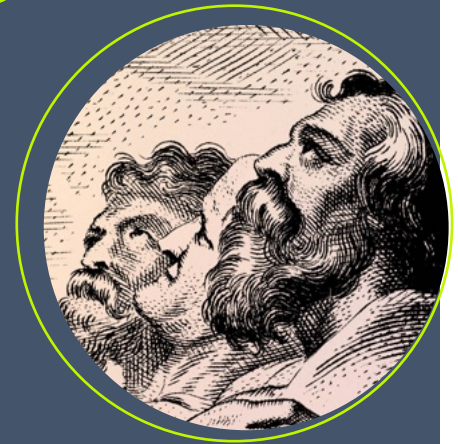
—Matthew 6:19-21, NIV

Jesus' chief and abiding interest is in integrity around these divisions. He's concerned with "where our heart is." Consider the fact that Jesus had for a treasurer a man whom he surely knew to be compromised with money. Judas' position as treasurer does not indicate managerial oversight or laxity on Jesus' part but does illustrate that Jesus—knowing both the weakness for material advancement abiding in Judas, and the eventual peril this weakness would produce—chose to let this drama play itself out. Quite possibly He did this for the sake of our instruction on the danger that a desire for money introduces into our lives.



The more we invest ourselves in the material, the more likely we are to become impotent in heaven's purposes for our lives because where our riches are, our heart is also. Our heart follows our money to the place we invest it (it doesn't work the other way around). We tell ourselves that our true heart is to help others and, in the interest of being able to do that *someday*, we are now focusing our lives on making lots of money so that *someday* we'll be in a position

JESUS HAD NO
INTEREST IN
JUDGING
MATERIAL
DISPUTES ROOTED
IN SELFISH
INTEREST.



to really help. Though this is a sincere sentiment, it is sincerely wrong in prioritization, and the intention rarely goes as planned. The reason it does not go as planned is that once a person adopts this *delayed distribution* thought process, the present passion hijacks the future purpose. Our heart becomes focused on the investments we have made, and, over time, we become convinced, in gradations, that we must continue to invest more and more so that someday we can really help people.

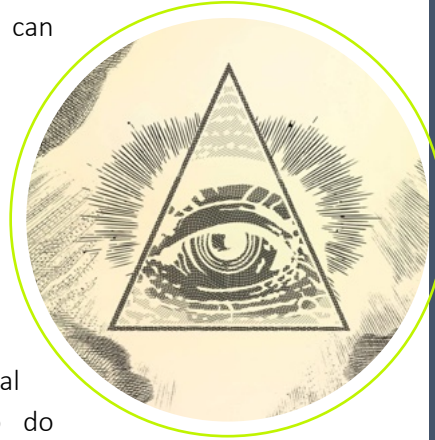
When we play the game this way the final score will be, *Personal Belongings 49, Other's Needs 7*. It sounds like a noble game plan at the outset but usually ends as a lopsided material victory. The heart follows the money. Accept that axiom as a spiritual fact and you will be inspired to do something different with your money right now.

Jesus said, "If we are faithful with a little, we will be faithful with a lot." If we are not inclined toward distribution with modest sums, we will not be so inclined with abundant sums. By the time abundance appears our heart has already been shaped into a clutching form.

To be called a "fool" by God is not a distinction any person would seek. To be rich and to be called a fool cuts to the very quick. After all, don't rich men take pride in their insights and business savvy? Wasn't it their intellect and wisdom that made them rich? In this parable of the Rich fool, Jesus delineates the specific qualities of character that would qualify any of us as a fool in God's eyes; one part astigmatism, one part self-absorption, and an overall lack of significant purpose. Jesus reveals the short-sightedness that traps men by their money:

1. The fool believes all they have is meant solely for their consumption (the hoarding impulse): "I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods."
2. The fool is focused primarily on seeking pleasure (the hedonistic impulse): "And I'll say to myself, '...Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

Jesus contests the hoarding and hedonistic impulses by asking a question that exposes the futility of the self-centered acquisition lifestyle, "Who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" The question exposes both the bitter irony and existential frustration attached to gathering only for oneself. This query, "Who will get it?"



THE HEART FOLLOWS THE MONEY.



bristles the selfish and acrimonious soul. The rich man who has worked his entire life storing away for his own personal pleasure—only to realize that all of it falls out of their control when their life is called. My friend Teddy likes to say, “The only money that is really yours is the money you spend.” He makes a valid point. Everything else will eventually be somebody else’s.

Jesus’ question exposes the futility of a solipsistic worldview and the vacuous state of the person who lacks the ability to think beyond himself, who stores only for himself, who spends only for his own pleasure, who’s gathering has only two objectives: 1. See how much I can gather; 2. Spend it on my own personal pleasure. If not careful we will miss the fact that the greatest sin being illustrated here is not the hoarding of goods, or even dissipation, but the squelching of a purposeful life. This rich fool does not envision any purpose past personal pleasure. The rich fool is saying “I’m going to take a few years off, get drunk, carouse and lay back,” thereby using his means as a bridge to a life without meaning.

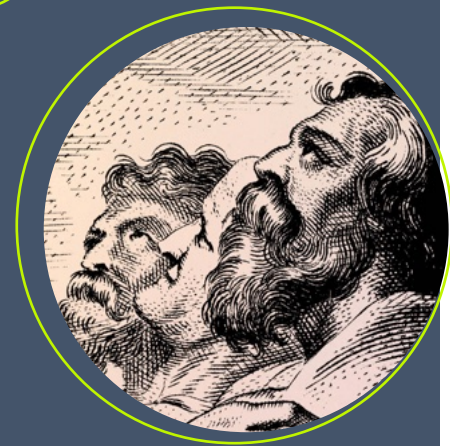


The hoarding and hedonistic impulses are criminal toward one’s own soul, for no other reason than that they cut one off from a life of meaningful engagement. If you examine the modern retirement savings pitch it resembles this blueprint. Work your entire career and save up all you can toward a life of leisure and consumption in your sixties and beyond.

But there’s a catch for millions who bought this propaganda. No one warned them of how they could get bored with nothing but leisure and games and end up depressed, drunk, divorced or dead. It is a foolish approach to life to stack up material means toward a life of meaningless engagement.

The self-consumed approach considers no one else’s predicament, ultimately leading to an impoverished spiritual state. *Jesus is really asking the rich man if he wants to be remembered as a shallow human who had deep resources.* In the end, people who think only of themselves are left only with...themselves. And the possessions they so cherished end up in the hands of another. That very thought, Jesus knew, would be utterly abhorrent to their hoarding spirit.

THE SELF-
CONSUMED
APPROACH
ULTIMATELY
LEADS TO AN
IMPOVERISHED
SPIRITUAL STATE.



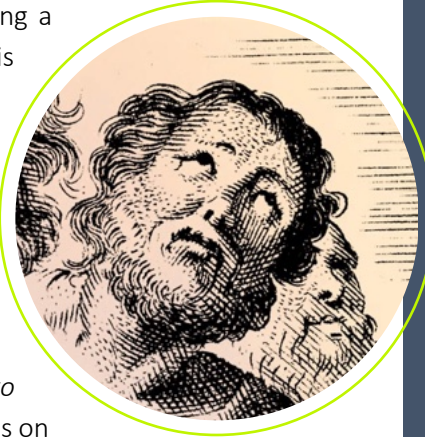
Gathering points to man. Distribution points to God. God is happy to give great measures of resources to a giver—someone he can trust in his plan for re-distribution. God has appointed to no man the role of building a museum or a storage facility for His gatherings. If we understand that we are God's conduits on this planet we will have a distribution plan. We are all part of His distribution system...the warehouse is not a permanent storage facility. This is a fundamental realization for those who wish to be rich toward God; *God does not call any of us to gather for ourselves alone.* He has designs on what can be done with that wealth. The rich fool's big mistake was in being shortsighted in his vision for his wealth. Nothing is as shortsighted as making pleasure our central aim. If your objective in all your labors is to simply take it easy, then you have missed the point of true life. When I consider those whose primary aim is pleasure-seeking, I recall the lyrics in the song, "*Life's been Good*," by Joe Walsh:

Have a mansion, forget the price
Ain't never been there, they tell me it's nice
I live in hotels, tear out the walls
I have accountants, pay for it all
My Maserati does 185
I lost my license now I don't drive
I have a limo, ride in the back
I lock the doors in case I'm attacked

These lyrics point out the pointlessness and aimlessness that results from a rich man's pursuit of costly things and of a good time. God designed us for better than that. Jesus' question, "Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" is like a riddle with the answer to true riches buried within it. Can you guess the answer?

The answer is someone besides you.

Hedonistic pursuits lead to predictable results...diminishing pleasure and an ever-growing need for greater, more elaborate rushes. The Rich Man featured in Jesus' parable gambled on being around to enjoy everything for a long time to come, and God called him on his bet.



WE ARE ALL PART
OF GOD'S
DISTRIBUTION
SYSTEM.



Jesus challenges those who have abundance to be “rich toward God.” This is not an indictment against having riches or occasions of pleasure, only against riches and pleasure having us. If we can gather and distribute with equilibrium, and if the goods gathered do not shackle our instincts toward generosity, we are, on balance, living a rich life. Maintaining an attitude of “richness” toward God is the result of:

- Keeping a skeptical perspective on the value of the material
- Staying in a place of perpetual gratitude
- Vigilantly maintaining spiritual defenses against the spirit of acquisitiveness, or owning simply for the sake of owning

A critical first step in becoming rich in God’s sight is to **convince your-self that it is all just “stuff.”**

JESUS
CHALLENGES
THOSE WHO HAVE
ABUNDANCE TO
BE “RICH
TOWARD GOD.”

