

Main Idea: In Luke 12:13-21 Jesus confronts us about our attitude towards the blessings we enjoy. It’s there that He told a parable about a man who failed to be thankful.

- I. Jesus confronted a problem (13-15).
 - A. A man tried to use Jesus (13-14).
 - B. Jesus warned about greed (15).
- II. Jesus told a parable (16-20).
 - A. Scene #1: We see prosperity (16).
 - B. Scene #2: We see the problem (17).
 1. It’s wrong to fail to thank God.
 2. It’s wrong to fail to give to God.
 3. It’s wrong to fail to share with the needy.
 - C. Scene #3: We see the plan (18-19).
 1. He decided to tear down good barns.
 2. He decided to build bigger barns.
 3. He intended to live the good life.
 - D. Scene #4: We see the punchline (20).
 1. You can’t take it with you.
 2. You don’t know when you’re leaving.
 3. You don’t know what will happen to it afterwards.
 4. You do know that you will give an account.
- III. Jesus clarified the point (21).
 - A. You’re in trouble when you fail to see beyond yourself.
 - B. You’re in trouble when you fail to see beyond this world.
 - C. You can escape trouble only if you are rich toward God.

Application: How can I tell if I am rich toward God?

1. Are you worrying about the things of this life? (see verses 22-30)
2. Are you seeking first God’s kingdom? (see verse 31)
3. Are you using your possessions for heavenly purposes? (see verses 32-34)
4. Are you living as a servant? (see verses 35-40)
5. Are you a faithful steward of your Master’s possessions? (verses 41-48)

“What kind of car do you have?” That’s the question one of my Ukrainian brothers asked me during our break time a few years ago as we stood there in Chernovsti. We’d been studying the Bible together and now were sharing our life stories. He had grown up under communism where getting necessities was hard and having a car was a big thing, even a beat up, twenty year old one. I grew up, well, the same way most of you did, in a land of opportunity and abundance.

So he then wanted to know what kind of car I owned. To be honest, I wasn’t sure how to answer him. It’s not that the answer was complicated, but the follow-up question to that answer might be.

I found myself thinking, “You want to know, what kind of car? Well, which of my *four* cars should I tell you about, the one I drive, the one my wife drives, or the cars my daughters drive?” And I could almost hear his anticipated response. “You have *four* cars? Wow. You’re a wealthy man. I wonder why God gave you *four* and me *one*.”

I wonder that, too. Every time I travel to another country and see the way the rest of the world lives, I wonder that. Why have I been given *more* than I need to live?

Three days ago we observed the holiday we call *Thanksgiving*. That’s a good question for us to ponder at Thanksgiving. Why has God given us so much, and how should we respond to His material blessings?

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ Adapted from message preached at WBC on 12/1/02

“Just say ‘thank you,’” you say. “That’s what He wants.” True, but is that all He wants? How should we respond if we enjoy material abundance? We need to know the biblical answer to that question. Which is why I want us to leave our current series in John’s gospel and look at Luke 12:13-21 for a Thanksgiving charge I’ve entitled, “*The Danger of Stockpiling.*”

I’m convinced that as Americans we need the message of Luke 12:13-21. More specifically, as Christians living in America we need the message of Luke 12:13-21. It’s a pointed message for in it Jesus confronts us about our attitude towards the blessings we enjoy. Let me give you the skeleton of the text at the outset, then we’ll walk through the passage and put some meat on the bones. There are three points.

I. Jesus confronted a problem (13-15).

II. Jesus told a parable (16-20).

III. Jesus clarified the point (21).

I. Jesus confronted a problem (13-15).

Verse 13 begins, “Someone in the crowd said to him.” We’ve obviously dropped right into the middle of an event. In chapters 10-13 the gospel writer, Luke, is describing what happened to Jesus during His ministry in Judea. The Lord’s popularity was exploding, so much so that Luke 12:1 says a crowd of many thousands gathered and were trampling on each other. The multitudes were fascinated by His miracles, His teaching, and His compassion for the needy.

In verses 1-12 Jesus warned His disciples to beware of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Then He forewarned them that persecution was coming.

At that point, someone in the crowd changed the topic of conversation. Apparently, the future didn’t interest this fellow nearly as much as the present. Simply put...

A. A man tried to use Jesus (13-14). Listen to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

Notice the man viewed Jesus as a rabbi. Rabbis were expected to be knowledgeable regarding the law and ready to give legal rulings. This man was ticked about a situation. His brother wouldn’t give him his share of his inheritance (probably referring to a property dispute) and he wanted Jesus to solve the problem.

How did Jesus respond? Notice verse 14, “Jesus replied, ‘Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?’”

That’s a curious response. Almost a rebuke of sorts. Why? If we took time to look back at Jesus’ teaching in verses 1-12 we’d see that this man didn’t seem to hear a word of it. Jesus had just told the crowd that there are things more important than things you can see, like the fact that the Father cares for His children and that we have nothing to fear, even when persecuted.

But this guy isn’t listening. He’s got an agenda. Notice he doesn’t ask a question. He makes a demand. “Teacher, *tell* my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

It’s one thing to say, “Rabbi, my brother and I are quarreling over our inheritance, and it’s dividing the family. Would you help us?” But this man didn’t ask Jesus for help. He told Him what to do. No wonder Jesus responded as He did.

Just think of it. Here’s a man who’s unwilling to consider his problem from any perspective other than his own. All he cares about are his rights.

But Jesus doesn’t go along with his self-absorbed scheme. He told the man it wasn’t His intent to be a “judge or arbiter.” The KJV uses the term “divider.” The man was fed up with his brother and wanted their relationship to be legally separated so he could get what he wanted out of it, his share of the inheritance. But Jesus didn’t come to be a

divider. Just the opposite. He came to be a *reconciler*. He came to reunite people to God and then to each other.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He used this teachable moment to address the heart issue that created the problem in the first place.

Verse 15—"Then he said to them [not just to the man but to the whole crowd], 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.'"

B. Jesus warned about greed (15). The fact is, we enter this world just like this man did, with powerful desires of all sorts. And one of the strongest is the desire to acquire more and more stuff.

It's not about stuff, says Jesus. In other words, there's more to life than land and bank accounts and cars and pensions.

By the way, could Jesus have settled this family dispute? Sure. But He refused. Why? Because He knew that this inheritance squabble was just a symptom of a much deeper problem, one that infected not only this man but the rest of the human race too.

Beware of the problem of greed, says the Master. Watch out for it. It's a killer. And illustrate the point He told a story.

II. Jesus told a parable (16-20).

There are four scenes in this parable.

A. Scene #1: We see prosperity (16). "And he told them this parable: 'The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop.'" Please notice that this is a story about a *rich* man. And don't miss the fact that this fellow is rich at the beginning of the story. That's important. Here is a man who already has more than others. He is wealthy. And due to subsequent events he will receive additional wealth.

We're not told how he became a rich man, nor that he was wrong for having riches. In fact, the Bible nowhere prohibits a person from having wealth.

As the story unfolds the rich man became richer. His ground produced a bumper crop. Remember, now, this man already had more than enough to live on. Yet on top of this, with apparently no extra effort on his part, he receives more profit, for his ground produced a good crop.

I grew up around farmers. Each year they did basically the same amount of work. They cultivated the fields, planted the seed, did their best to get rid of the weeds, and then brought in the harvest. Sometimes their work produced a decent crop, sometimes a poor crop, sometimes an outstanding crop, but for the most part the outcome was out of their control.

So with this man. He already had plenty, but now he's rolling in the dough. He didn't earn it. He didn't need it, yet there he is, with an undeserved surplus.

Sounds like a lot of us, doesn't it? We're not worrying about where tomorrow's meal will come from, or if we'll have warm clothing, or a dry place to sleep. If we're worrying about anything, it's what Steve Farrar describes in the following prayer.

*Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray my Cuisinart to keep
I pray my stocks are on the rise
And that my analyst is wise
That all the wine I sip is white
And that my hot tub's watertight
That racquetball won't get too tough
That all my sushi's fresh enough*

*I pray my cordless phone still works
That my career won't lose its perks
My microwave won't radiate
My condo won't depreciate
I pray my health club doesn't close
And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake
I pray my Volvo they won't take.²*

That's scene #1, a man in prosperity.

B. Scene #2: We see the problem (17). "He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'" What a problem! Too many crops and too little space. To put it in contemporary terms, it's a man with three cars who's bummed because he's only got a two car garage. Or a woman who's perplexed because all the new clothes she just bought on sale won't fit into her packed closets.

So what did the man in the story do? He seeks advice from his favorite consultant. No, he didn't ask God. Nor did he seek counsel from other people. Jesus said he "thought to *himself*." Evidently he has no one he trusts with a decision as important as this. Perhaps he's suspicious and even threatened by others. Wealth can do that to us, you know. To protect his wealth, this man blocked out the world, but in the end the walls he created became his prison.

What strikes me is what the man *didn't* say. He didn't say, "This extra wealth is a God-given blessing for which I can take no credit." Nor did he say, "I really don't need any of this. I am already wealthy. I should help someone, like the Torah encourages." But no. He simply refers to the surplus as "my crops." And the only solution he ponders is how to keep it all for himself.

The rich man's actions illustrate for us three very dangerous responses to wealth.

1. *It's wrong to fail to thank God.* "Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits," Psalm 103:2 says. "Give thanks to the LORD," Psalm 106:1 exhorts. When God sends benefits into our lives and we fail to thank Him for them, we're insulting Him. The Scriptures again and again call us to *give thanks*. And think of His greatest blessing. To know that God sent His Son to rescue your soul from hell and to fail to say "Thank You" with your lips and life is the greatest insult possible.

2. *It's wrong to fail to give to God.* That, of course, is what God in His Word tells us to do with our income. In the Old Testament the Lord commanded His people to give Him a tithe of all their increase, ten percent (see Malachi 3:8-12). In the New Testament there is no stated percentage, but rather exhortations to give generously and cheerfully (2 Cor 9:7). So when God blesses us and we refuse to give the first portion of that blessing back to Him, we're revealing something about the condition of our hearts. Giving is a way to show the Giver that He means more to us than His gifts. Not giving reveals there's something else more important to us.

3. *It's wrong to fail to share with the needy.* In the Old Testament God told the Israelites not to harvest their crops in the corners of their fields. Why not? They were to leave the corner crops behind for the poor.

Don't miss this. When we receive God's abundant provisions, He doesn't want us to keep it all for ourselves. He blesses us so we can bless others who have needs.

² Steve Farrar, *Family Survival in the American Jungle*, 1991, Multnomah Press, p. 63.

Here's where the problem lies. Because of our sin bent, our natural response to God's blessings received isn't to thank Him, and isn't to give back to Him, and isn't to share with the needy. It's to stockpile.

A. W. Tozer put it this way in his book, *I Talk Back to the Devil*: "Money often comes between men and God. Someone has said that you can take two small ten-cent pieces, just two dimes, and shut out the view of a panoramic landscape. Go to the mountains and just hold two coins closely in front of your eyes--the mountains are still there, but you cannot see them at all because there is a dime shutting off the vision in each eye."

The issue isn't the amount of money. Just a little bit of money given the wrong place in your life can obscure your view of God and others.³

Let's be honest. The man in Jesus' story isn't the last man to struggle with this problem. I read somewhere that although Americans comprise but 7% of the world's population, we consume 40% of the world's resources. Just like the rich man in the parable, most of us have far more than we need to live. We could live on less if we wanted to lower our standard of living.

And may I remind you that we didn't earn the privilege of being born in America? It's solely by the sovereign, gracious purposes of God that we are here and not in a shantytown outside of Manila. So what are we going to do with the unearned, undeserved surpluses God has given us? In reality, we answer that question every day by the choices we make, just like the rich man did in scene # 3.

C. Scene #3: We see the plan (18-19). "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.'"

Notice the methodical, logical approach this self-confident tycoon took to solve his problem of space. As a shrewd businessman he developed a three-phase long range plan.

1. *He decided to tear down good barns.* Yes, perfectly good barns. The only problem with his existing barns was that they were too small to handle the surplus.

2. *He decided to build bigger barns.* Bigger is better, right? He needed bigger barns so he could hoard the extra grain.

By the way, notice how preoccupied the rich man was with himself. The most common words in the parable are "I," "my," and "myself." There are eleven personal pronouns in this man's speech to himself. He didn't see the hand of God, but only himself.

3. *He intended to live the good life.* Verse 19 again, "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.'"

I don't think this parable is anti-planning. Proverbs 6:8 commends the ant for it "stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest." But it's one thing to plan so that the needs of those for whom you are responsible will be met. It's another thing to plan so *you* can live an easy, self-absorbed life.

I'll speak frankly. The *Wall Street Journal* would do a feature on the fellow in our story, holding him up as the epitome of success. Here's a man who through shrewd planning was able to retire at the age of 45 with enough surplus wealth to live securely the rest of his life. Our world says this is the life of the hero. God says it's the life of the *fool*.

³ Cedric Gowler.

You say, “That’s being a bit harsh, isn’t it, to call someone a *fool*?” I’m just using the word that God used in scene 4.

D. Scene #4: We see the punchline (20). “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?’”

A fool is a person who lives today as if there’s no tomorrow. That’s true of the person who spends every penny he gets now as if winter isn’t coming (check out Proverbs). But it’s also true of the person who hoards every penny he gets now as if eternity isn’t coming.

It’s been said that some people are so heavenly-minded they’re no earthly good. You might meet such a person once in awhile. But for every one of those there are ten of these, people who are so earthly-minded that they are no heavenly good. The world—strike that, *churches* are full of people who are too busy building bigger barns to really get serious about living life sold-out for God.

It’s not a trivial problem. Jesus calls the person who’s consumed with the things of this world a *fool*. Why so? Why is it foolish to live a self-centered life and hoard the blessings of God? We see four reasons right here.

1. *You can’t take it with you.* You can build bigger barns, sure, but you can’t fit those barns in your casket.

2. *You don’t know when you’re leaving.* Jesus says, “This very night your life will be demanded from you.” You may enjoy the good life for the next twenty or thirty years. Or you may be leaving this world in twenty minutes. My friend, you don’t know when you’re leaving, nor do I.

3. *You don’t know what will happen to it afterwards.* God asked the rich man quite a question in verse 20, “Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” It’s crazy, isn’t it? You can scratch and claw for years to get things that an incompetent heir can fritter away in a couple of days. This rich man devoted his life to the pursuit of financial security. He guarded his pennies and made strategic investments. But in the end he left every penny behind.

You can’t take it with you. You don’t know when you’re leaving. You don’t know what will happen to it afterwards. But you do know this...

4. *You do know that you will give an account.* “This very night your life [lit. ‘your soul’] will be *demanded* from you.” The Greek verb for “demanded” [‘required’ in the KJV] was a banking term commonly used for the return of a loan. You borrow for a house? You’re going to pay it back. The payback isn’t optional, but demanded.

Do you hear what God is saying to this man? “Your soul is on loan and I’m the creditor. I loaned you your soul, Mr. Rich Man. Now I want the loan returned. It’s time to pay up.” This man refused to admit that his crops were a gift from God, and now he learns that his very life is a gift from God.

Now answer this. How’d the rich man respond to God’s pointed question in verse 20? The answer is, *we don’t know*. Jesus doesn’t tell us. He finishes the story and leaves us hanging. Why would He do that? Because what matters isn’t how a rich man in a made up story responded. What matters is how real people who have more than they need will respond.

Listen to Jesus’ very next words (21), “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” There’s the point of the parable...

III. Jesus clarified the point (21).

Remember how our text began? There was a man who was more concerned about getting his inheritance than restoring a broken relationship with his brother, a man for whom *things* were more important than *people*. Jesus knows the man isn't alone. "This is how it will be with *anyone* who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

Leo Tolstoy once wrote a story about a peasant farmer who was not satisfied with his lot. He wanted more of everything, and one day he received the offer of his dreams. For 1000 rubles, he could buy all the land he could walk around in a day. The only catch in the deal was that he had to be back at his starting point by sundown.

Early the next morning the man started out walking at a fast pace. By midday he was very tired, but he kept going, covering more and more ground. Well into the afternoon he realized that his greed had taken him far from the starting point. So he quickened his pace and as the sun began to sink low in the sky, he began to run, knowing that if he did not make it back by sundown the opportunity to become an even bigger landholder would be lost. As the sun began to sink below the horizon he came within sight of the finish line. Gasping for breath, his heart pounding, he called upon every bit of strength left in his body and staggered across the line just before the sun disappeared. He immediately collapsed, blood streaming from his mouth. In a few minutes he was dead.

Afterwards, his servants dug a grave. It was not much over six feet long and three feet wide. The title of Tolstoy's story was: *How Much Land Does a Man Need?*⁴

For the record, it's not wrong to have things. God created the world and said it was all very good (Gen 1:31). 1 Timothy 4:4 says, "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." But those final two words are key, *with thanksgiving*. It's not wrong to have things, but it's very wrong, indeed it's eternally dangerous when *things have us*.

Dear friends, it's so much easier to spot greed in someone else than in our own hearts. We need the Lord's help to see it. And that's what the Lord does for us in verse 21. He helps us see it. When I ponder Jesus' words, I learn three lessons.

A. You're in trouble when you fail to see beyond yourself. God doesn't bless us so we can hoard it with self-focused living. God blesses us so we can serve Him and others more effectively. And there will be a day of reckoning, as Jesus Himself said later in this same sermon in verse 48, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded."

John Wesley's rule of life was very simple and we can learn from it. *Save all you can and give all you can*. Every in his life while living at Oxford he made 30 pounds a year and lived on 28 and gave away 2. When his income increased to 60 pounds a year, he lived on 28 and gave away 32. When he later made 90 and even 120 pounds a year, he still lived on 28 and gave the balance away.

The problem with the rich man in the parable is that he never saw beyond himself. All that mattered to him was grabbing all the gusto this world could offer.

What about you? Is it your aim to use what you have for the glory of God and the good of others? If it's not, the problem isn't with your pocketbook. It's with your heart. "Be on guard against all kinds of greed," Jesus said in verse 15. And in reality, that's our problem. We're born greedy. And that's also why Jesus came to earth, to rescue us from our greed and its consequences.

See Him hanging on the cross, my friend. Why is He there? Because of our selfish greed. He went to the cross to pay the penalty we deserved to pay.

⁴ *Bits & Pieces*, November, 1991.

Did you realize that your attitude towards money is an indicator of the condition of your heart? That's what verse 34 says. If you want a new heart, you must place your faith in Jesus Christ. He came and gave His life as a ransom payment to set sinners free from the penalty and power of living for themselves. Then He rose again and offers new life to all who will repent and believe in Him.

There's lesson #1. You're in trouble when you fail to see beyond yourself.

B. You're in trouble when you fail to see beyond this world. Friends, a hundred years from now you and I won't be here. The things we're pouring our lives into will be gone—our homes, our cars, our money—all gone. Since that's true, know this. We're in trouble if we're failing to see beyond this world.

Some here today have never confessed Jesus as Savior and Lord. You're just like the rich man, living your life without looking beyond this world. I urge you today. Look at your life from the perspective of eternity.

Others of you have professed Christ, but your priorities are out of whack. Your brother's inheritance is more important to you than your brother.

You say, "How do I change?" Listen to Jesus' words one more time, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." Take the "not" out of that final clause you'll have the answer. Lesson #3...

C. You can escape trouble only if you are rich toward God. That raises a question, doesn't it? If the solution for stockpiling is being rich toward God, how can I tell if I'm rich toward God? And if I'm not, how can I become so?

Application: How can I tell if I am rich toward God?

We find the answer in what Jesus said right after He concluded this parable. In verse 22 He began to address His disciples and gave them a series of very pointed and practical commands. Scan verses 22 through 48 and you'll see Jesus' answer in practical terms as to *how* to be rich toward God.

We don't have time to teach through this section, but I do want us to see Jesus' answer. I'll put it in the form of five questions.

1. *Are you worrying about the things of this life? (see verses 22-30)* If so, that needs to change if you want to be rich toward God.

2. *Are you seeking first God's kingdom? (see verse 31)* "The pagan world runs after all such things (verse 30)." "But seek His kingdom and these will be given you as well (verse 31)." People who are rich toward God seek first His kingdom.

3. *Are you using your possessions for heavenly purposes? (see verses 32-34)* Like what? Verse 33—"Sell your possessions and give to the poor." Don't hoard your possessions. That's not what a person does who is rich toward God. Use them to meet needs.

4. *Are you living as a servant? (see verses 35-40)* A person who is rich toward God is. Verse 35—"Be dressed ready for service." This isn't my world. It's His. And a person who is rich towards God sees himself as His servant.

5. *Are you a faithful steward of your Master's possessions? (verses 41-48)* We have been entrusted with much, says verse 48. Again, it's not really ours, but His. And if we are rich toward God we will be faithful stewards of what belongs to Him.