

FROM THE FUNNY POSTS DEPARTMENT: Dear Wine, We had a deal. You were to make me funnier, sexier, smarter, and a better dancer. I saw the video. We need to talk.

Wouldn't it be great if we could put ourselves in the dryer for 10 minutes and come out wrinkle free and 2 sizes smaller?

Insanity does not run in my family. It strolls through, taking its time, getting to know everyone personally.

You are about to exceed the limits of my medication!

I have put a lot of thought into it and I just don't think being an adult is gonna work for me.

OK, first some background on this gospel text. The context for Jesus' teaching about the rich fool is an inheritance dispute. Apparently, an older brother must have been dragging his feet in dividing the family money – and a younger sibling attempts to get Jesus involved because 'Judge Judy' wasn't holding court that day. Jesus' response is curtly negative. He chooses not to get sucked into this family fracas.

This is actually one of three occasions in the gospels when someone asked Jesus to do something to a third party. In all three cases, He refused to reinforce such a manipulative way of dealing with problems. The other 2 times were when Martha complained about Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus while she was doing all the work – and the day the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught in the act of adultery. It seems Jesus' approach was always to reinforce the idea that people should take responsibility for their own actions and their own lives – and resolve their own conflicts. We are never told to go to God and focus our attention on the offenses of others. When we go to God, we need to go with our own baggage, and most of us could fill several steamer trunks with what we are lugging around in our heads! We are told to deal with the plank in our own eye rather than the speck in someone else's. We are supposed to go to God as grateful people – not as complainers or accusers.

But scholars suggest there may have been a deeper reason why Jesus refused to do what the man in our story asked of Him. He might have sensed that the real issue was not justice – but a spirit of covetousness. Because Jesus responded: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Again and again in the gospels, Jesus demonstrates a good nose for idolatry. He had more to say about this first commandment – no idols – than all the other 9 put together: "I am the Lord – You shall have no other gods before me." (Ex 20:23) Jesus was very sensitive to our human tendency to elevate something that is not God into godlike status. Apparently this is what Jesus detected behind the younger brother's concern.

Second, so what's the big deal? Idolatry is not a surface or incidental matter. It can lead to devastating consequences. To look for something where it does not exist is the ultimate formula for disappointment. This is what we do in an act of idolatry: we look for something temporary to fill an eternal desire. Jesus must have sensed that this was what the man was doing. By asking Jesus to help him get his inheritance, he was perhaps thinking that the money from his inheritance would bring him fulfillment. Perhaps the real problem was not with the older brother at all, but with the younger one's confused understanding of reality itself. This is the only way to make sense of Jesus' response to the man: "Take care to guard against all greed, for one's life does not consist of possessions."

Now we need to remember that Jesus was never simplistic in the way He dealt with the material realm. There have always been economic absolutists on both ends of the continuum. There are people who say the material realm is all there is, there being no other kind of reality except the realm of things. At the other extreme, there are those who say that wealth, in and of itself, is evil and that any kind of private property or possession is lethal to the human spirit.

Jesus did not identify with either of these extremes. His attitude toward the material dimension of life was one of sanity and balance. He did not take a vow of poverty, for example. Proof of this is the fact that He was often accused of being a 'glutton and a drunkard' (Lk 7:34), of loving the good things of life too much. He never said that simply possessing something was an evil in itself. When He was arrested at the end of His life, He was wearing a seamless robe – a fine and valuable garment – that's why the soldiers cast lots to see who would get it. Jesus also numbered many wealthy individuals among His best friends. One of the heroes of His stories – the Good Samaritan – was obviously well-to-do, having resources out of which he was able to act on behalf of the poor man who had been robbed, beaten and left half dead along the road.

I think Jesus would agree that possessing private property can help us in our moral development. Think about it. How do we ever become responsible if we never have anything for which we are responsible? If we never let people experience ownership of any kind, all they will ever know is infantile dependency. We have to have something that is our own in order to learn how to be responsible stewards.

Jesus never said that wealth was everything or that wealth was evil. What He did say quite clearly was that the material order can do certain things for us, and that it cannot do other things. It does not possess all of the resources that we need to be fulfilled as human beings. If we place any material object on the altar of ultimate importance, hoping to extract from it everything that feeds the hungers of our heart, we are going to be sorely disappointed. Witness all the unhappy and angry well-off people in our country today. It may look like they have it all. But their bitterness reveals that they put their energy in the wrong place.

Third, the parable of the rich fool illustrates all of this. Notice that Jesus does not label the man as good or bad – but rather calls him a 'fool.' Here was a man who was already rich, a farmer whose land produced a bumper crop that he had no capacity to store. He would tear down his barns – make bigger ones – and then take his ease – eat, drink, and be merry – and forget about everything – and everyone else.

It is precisely this kind of person that American culture often singles out as a real success. Yet Jesus, a Galilean peasant who had virtually nothing to call His own, declared this way of living profoundly foolish. The man was foolish for 3 reasons:

Because no amount of wealth can give us security against all the uncertainties of life. Things can do only so much. We all have hungers and needs that no amount of wealth can touch. All studies show that the MORE money we have, the LESS happy we are. There's a huge lesson in that! Also, money cannot make another person love or care for you.

In the classic movie CITIZEN KANE, one of the turning points occurs when the wife of the rich central figure announces that she has had enough and is going to leave him. He says, "But you can't," and she answers, "I am going to," and out she walks. There he was, in a magnificent estate surrounded by a whole cadre of servants. Yet for all that wealth and influence, he was powerless to make someone about whom he really cared remain by his side. The rich man in the parable was not evil. There is no hint that he made his fortune dishonestly. He was just foolish, thinking that wealth could do for him what in fact it did not have the power to do.

A second reason for describing this man as a fool is that he had missed the genuine delight that comes from an experience of profound gratitude, from realizing how much he had received that was utterly beyond his deserving. One of the highest of all joys lies in recognizing the primal grace behind all things. This farmer's egotism and lack of gratitude are incredible. Notice how often the words 'I' and 'my' occur in the story. Here is a man who obviously thought that his own efforts were the only source of the great bounty he had just harvested.

A third clue as to why the man was called foolish is in his absence of generosity. Many spiritual writers tell us that generosity is the most basic of all the virtues. In the time before time, the Bible suggests that God said, "This wonder of life is too good to keep to myself. I want others to get in on this ecstasy and to experience this wonder." This is the biblical answer to the question "Why something and not nothing?" Creation is at bottom an act of generosity – God sharing the bounty of what He was and what He had – which is why the farmer in the parable is so out of touch with ultimate reality. He was foolish because He missed, by 180 degrees, what it means to be made in the image of God. He looked on his abundance and said the very opposite of what God said in the beginning. He proposed to keep it all to himself, which is the surest way to miss life's deepest meaning. Just as there is a delight in recognizing how much we have that we do not deserve or create – so there is another kind of delight – a kind of potency – that lies in seeing our generosity bless and energize other people. This quality of magnanimity lies at the root of our being the kind of creatures that we were meant to be. And it just plain FEELS GOOD to give – and to give generously!

When God judged the man in our parable to be a fool, it must not have been with scorn but with infinite sadness, for he had missed what it means to be a human being. Perhaps the deepest sadness of this man was that he had not brought delight to others by what he had given away. What a form of impoverishment! Another face of this same truth is that the clear differentiation between what one IS and what one HAS gets acted out in the moment of death. We shall all be separated from the things we possess at that awesome moment. To the rich man in the parable who hoarded all he owned for himself, Jesus posed this haunting question: "When you die, who will then own all this to which you are so attached?" Death is going to make generous givers of us all. Everything we have will pass on to others eventually. This parable is a wonderful reminder – we are made in the image of Generosity. If we are going to be generous ultimately in our death – we should get in on the joy of participating intentionally in what is the very essence of our being. To give. To give generously. Here and now. Amen. (all adapted from John Claypool, STORIES JESUS STILL TELLS: THE PARABLES)