

A Mafia godfather finds out that his bookkeeper has stolen \$10 million from him. The bookkeeper is deaf. It was the reason he got the job in the first place, since it was assumed that a deaf bookkeeper would not be able to hear anything that he'd ever have to testify about in court. When the godfather goes to shake down the bookkeeper about his missing \$10 million, he brings along his attorney, who knows sign language.

The godfather asks the bookkeeper, "Where is the \$10 million you embezzled from me?"

The attorney, using sign language, asks the bookkeeper where the \$10 million is hidden.

The bookkeeper signs back, "I don't know what you are talking about."

The attorney tells the godfather: "He says he doesn't know what you're talking about."

That's when the godfather pulls out a 9 mm pistol, puts it to the bookkeeper's temple, cocks it, and says, "Ask him again!"

The attorney signs to the underling, "He'll kill you for sure if you don't tell him!"

The bookkeeper signs back, "OK!! You win! The money is in a brown briefcase, buried behind the shed in my cousin Enzo's backyard in Queens!"

The godfather asks the attorney, "Well, what did he say?"

The attorney replies, "He says you don't have the guts to pull the trigger!"

First, the text itself. Inheritance disputes were common in ancient Israel, and they sometimes divided families. Sound familiar? In Jewish teaching, the eldest son received a double portion (Dt 21:17) of an inheritance, but disputes still arose, and rabbis, as experts in the law, were sometimes called to resolve them. For Jesus to treat a normally legitimate legal recourse here as a sign of greed seems to radically value relationships over property. (CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS STUDY BIBLE, p. 1789, note on 12:13-15)

Jesus asks, "Man, who made me a judge or arbiter over you?" While Jesus tells this young man how to be a steward of his excess wealth, he first issues a word about personal stewardship. The man is to be in charge of himself. The man is to grow up. He is to make his own decisions about what to do with his wealth.

But Jesus offers him direction by way of a parable. He tells of a man who has enjoyed a great harvest and considers building bigger barns. Jesus introduces a clarification of true values. Life is not having the most toys at the end. Life is not about possessing things. Life, instead, is about being able to give things away. To become lighter, not heavier, over time. All the grain in the world cannot substitute for soul. Full barns are not full souls. At any time, in the parable Jesus tells, someone could require your soul. And what if we have lost it in the way we have lived our lives?

I remember distinctly running with a friend of mine about 20 years ago. He asked me to pray for him as he was about to enter into a business deal that would very likely make him a lot of money. I asked him "What will you do with it?" (He was already very well off.) He said "I can give a lot more to the church and other causes." He was already a very generous person. I said "Do you think you are mature enough to have a lot of money?" He said, "Woah, no one has ever asked me that." I just mentioned to him that I had known a number of people in various parishes that were pretty nice people – until they got lots of money. Suddenly, they seemed to think that they knew more than others, were smarter than others, had worked harder than

others, and were better than others. And while they made a lot more money, it was not reflected in their giving.

The truth is that very few people work harder in America than the working poor, often juggling 2 – even 3 jobs, just to make ends meet. Every week they have to make decisions to pay the rent or mortgage, buy food or medicine, or dental care, or eyeglasses, because they simply can't make enough to pay for the necessities of life. I told my running companion that I would pray for him, but that he should ask God to make him a wise and generous steward if he were to make him a wealthy one. Happily, he seems to have managed this, has been very generous to numerous causes, and we remain friends to this day.

We are all familiar with what are called Third World problems: poverty, hunger, lack of healthcare, etc. Recently I've heard the phrase First World problems. Here is a list of some of them from a blog writer nicknamed Cheeky Kid:

- My house is such a mess! There's stuff everywhere.
- My walk-in closet is not big enough
- Polishing the marble in my bathroom is such a thankless job.
- There's too much ice in my iced coffee from Starbucks.
- The portion sizes in this restaurant are too big.
- My house is so big that the wi-fi signal is weak in some of the rooms.
- There's nothing good on TV right now.
- I can't believe I bought a toaster with no bagel setting.

These are definitely problems unique to people who have a lot. The man in our gospel story suffered from First World problems. And while we may not have the same problem as the man in this story, we may have the same mindset. And that is the biggest problem of all.

If we read through the gospels, it becomes obvious that when Jesus doesn't give people what they want in life, it's because He's about to give them what they really need: a greater understanding of God, the Source of true life, and the Gospel, the path to true life.

Now there is something unique in this story in Luke that can't be found in any other parable in the New Testament. This is the only time when God directly calls someone a fool. In Jesus' stories, there are lots of people who do foolish things. But this is the only one of Jesus' stories in which God calls someone a fool to his face. Which means this is pretty serious stuff. The Greek word used for fool literally means 'without inner perspective.' The Bible contains whole lists of foolish versus wise living. And the foolish behavior almost always boils down to living without the perspective of God. Fools live only for themselves – and only for the moment. Do we want to reach the end of our life and have God call us a fool?

So, second, the difference between the fool's perspective and God's perspective. The fool saw his wealth as a storage problem; God saw his wealth as a mindset problem. Only in the First World do we rent warehouses to store the overflow stuff that we cannot stuff into our overly stuffed houses. If we have a storage problem, we may well also have a spiritual problem.

If we are taking our following of Jesus seriously, it changes our mindset, and our priorities. We have an increased sense of gratitude for the things that money can't buy – love and hope and peace and joy. The second change in mindset is a deep desire to share with others in practical ways. That's why we find hospitals and orphanages and homeless shelters and Brown Bag Ministries and Western Wake Crisis and Haiti Goat projects all over the world that were started by followers of Christ.

Third, this man was also a fool because he talked to himself about his money situation rather than talking to God about it. Notice the passage: "The rich man thought to himself, 'what shall I do?'...this is what I'll do....I will, I will, I will, I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

It always amazes me when people tell me they have come back from a month or 2 or 3 month vacation or cruise. I've often wondered "Wow! That's a ton of money! I wonder how much they give to the collection." Funny how it's a pretty typical number in almost every case -- \$10 a week – WHEN THEY ARE HERE! Which isn't much of the time. I think that indicates a serious spiritual problem, and might well earn them the fool title from God. The rich man proved himself a fool because he lived as if there were no God. He lived as if the highest purpose of his life was the pursuit of his own pleasure. In reality, God is our Creator. We were made in His image and for His purposes. Wise people know this and work to align their values, priorities, desires and actions with the character and will of God.

And finally, (this is point number 4 – OMG! – but no, you will NOT die, I promise!) the last thing that made this man a fool was that he saw his wealth only as an opportunity for pleasure; God saw his wealth as an opportunity for giving. The reality is that every blessing we receive from God is an opportunity for greater giving. We have an opportunity to partner with God in meeting the needs and healing the hurts of others. We have the opportunity to be the presence of Jesus in real life. And we do that by sharing with others. But we also do that by giving ourselves away. If God gave us gifts of leadership, we should lead; if gifts of wisdom, we should perhaps be a catechist; if the gift of unity, we should act to heal divisions, and if God gave us wealth, we should share it happily. (much of this entire text was very freely adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, May-August 2022, p. 63-65)

I conclude with some rather strong and pithy words by Methodist preacher Will Willimon. And although most of us would not consider ourselves wealthy, we are far better off than way more than half of the world. He writes: "Let us speak to persons who have achieved much, accumulated much who, like the farmer with bursting barns, with an appeal to use their gifts in service of God's beloved who are in need. As Christians, as the church, we have demanded too little. We have spoken of Christianity as if it were a cushion and not a cross. We have promised to relieve people of all their aches and pains, all their cares and burdens, all their questions and doubts. We have transformed the faith into an insipid souffle with all air and no nourishment, a sweet placebo, which cures nothing because it challenges no one. It is a faith which is hardly worth living for, much less dying for. We have so tamed and housebroken the Spirit that it soothes more than it prods. This dull, domesticated, impotent version of the faith is a heresy which mocks the Christianity for which people once bled and died.

It's too late for the successful farmer. Time's up. This night the fool's life ends. But it's not too late for the rest of us. Can we come to see our lives, our talents, our material possessions as gifts from God to be gratefully used for the glory of God? In this way is true wisdom." Amen. (PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2022, p. 17)