

Rich Towards God

First in a Series of Five Sermons - "Our Life Together in Christ"

July 31, 2022

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." 14 But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 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." 16 And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, 17 and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' 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. 19 And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" 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?' 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Rich Towards God, Valued By God, Divided At The Cross, Struggling Through The Narrow Door, Invited To Come Up Higher

Dear Friends in Christ,

I can think of at least three ways a person can live life. 1) Apart from Christ/which is to be a fool, Biblically speaking, 2) Following Jesus at a distance/ akin to playing with fire, and 3) Following Jesus closely / putting yourself in a position to live the truly abundant life.. Today we begin a five part sermon series aimed at helping each one of us follow Him more closely. Even as we rejoice that in all the seasons of life, Jesus is our Good Shepherd Who is in fact following us around with goodness and mercy. Our sermon series overall theme is "Our Life Together in Christ." Next Sunday, our theme is "Valued By God." Two Sundays from now, a surprising theme, "Divided at the Cross." Three Sundays from now, "Struggling Through the Narrow Door." And finally, "Invited To Come Up Higher."

Today, Jesus would invite us to explore what it means to be "Rich Towards God." Two parts to our sermon today, two battles that each of us must fight in all the seasons of life - especially those of us who are approaching our Golden Years - Battle #1 is Greed vs. Gratefulness. And Battle #2 is Storing Up vs. Generosity.

• Greed vs. Gratefulness

One day a fisherman was lying on a beautiful beach, with his fishing pole propped up in the sand and his solitary line cast out into the sparkling blue surf. He was enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun and the prospect of catching a fish.

About that time, a businessman came walking down the beach, trying to relieve some of the stress of his workday. He noticed the fisherman sitting on the beach and decided to find out why this fisherman was fishing instead of working harder to make a living for himself and his family. "You aren't going to catch many fish that way," said the businessman to the fisherman.

"You should be working rather than lying on the beach!"

The fisherman looked up at the businessman, smiled and replied, "And what will my reward be?"

"Well, you can get bigger nets and catch more fish!" was the businessman's answer. "And then what will my reward be?" asked the fisherman, still smiling. The businessman replied, "You will make money and you'll be able to buy a boat, which will then result in larger catches of fish!"

"And then what will my reward be?" asked the fisherman again.

The businessman was beginning to get a little irritated with the fisherman's questions. "You can buy a bigger boat, and hire some people to work for you!" he said.

"And then what will my reward be?" repeated the fisherman.

The businessman was getting angry. "Don't you understand? You can build up a fleet of fishing boats, sail all over the world, and let all your employees catch fish for you!"

Once again the fisherman asked, "And then what will my reward be?"

The businessman was red with rage and shouted at the fisherman, "Don't you understand that you can become so rich that you will never have to work for your living again! You can spend all the rest of your days sitting on this beach, looking at the sunset. You won't have a care in the world!"

The fisherman, still smiling, looked up and said, “ That’s what I’m doing now.

Greed vs. Gratefulness

The context of the Parable of the Rich Fool is a story that Jesus tells in response to a man who interrupted Jesus as He was preaching to a huge crowd of first century folks. To be sure, it was common practice for Jewish people to ask their rabbis questions about personal matters. Luke records that **“so many thousands of people had gathered together that they were trampling one another.”** This man apparently felt he had been treated unfairly by his brother with regard to the family inheritance. He steps up and asks Jesus to be on his side and to straighten out his brother.

Jesus refuses to get involved in the man’s dispute and instead did what He often did. He doesn’t answer the question. He switches the subject. He invites His hearers to think about their attitude towards their possessions. He had already warned His catechumens about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. And now He expands the warning to include what both the 9th and 10th commandments warn us to guard against - the sin of covetousness. To covet is to have a sinful desire for that which is not ours. It is the opposite of contentment, which is to be grateful for the basic necessities of life and to be super grateful for everything beyond the basics.

Greed vs. Gratefulness.

The man in this parable already had worldly wealth, and instead of expressing His thankfulness to God, He talks himself into tearing down his barns and building bigger and better ones. Instead of realizing that all of His possessions and life itself were gifts from God, He takes the attitude of the business man in our opening story. He congratulates Himself on the wisdom of His plan for bigger and better. He pronounces his own future to be secure. He consults with nobody else and celebrates all by himself that his riches will allow him to spend the rest of His days resting, eating, drinking, and being merry.

At which point, God crashes the party and gives him the unwelcome news that greed leads to death. That life is a gift of God that can be demanded back at anything. That what Solomon learned in his old age was true throughout the ages - life apart from God is meaningless. **“I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees....I bought male and female slaves,...I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in**

Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kinds and province....I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem...Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toils, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks who have been hearing and believing and holding close to their hearts God's precious Word for decades. Over the years, the Holy Spirit has worked in their hearts a gratefulness for First Article gifts like life itself, basic necessities and so much more. Gratefulness for Second Article gifts like the forgiveness of their sins, for the simple truth that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, for the peace and the joy and the contentment and the strength that only Jesus Christ can provide. Gratefulness for Third Article blessings like the gift of faith begun in the waters of Baptism and nourished by Word and Sacrament over the years.

• Storing Up vs. Generosity

Professor Art Just from the Ft. Wayne Seminary comments, *“To be rich towards God is to believe that God is the giver of all things, including life and salvation. To show that one believes is to share with others the gifts that God has given. This is the consistent teaching of Jesus in his various words about possessions. Behind it is the Gospel of grace: forgiveness is bestowed as God's free gift in Jesus Christ. Yet a time of accountability will come when God will ask whether his free gift of forgiveness was appropriated through faith or was abused by the arrogant assumption that God's gifts were personal possessions carried by one's own efforts and therefore at one's disposal to hoard or waste foolishly.”*

The question repeatedly asked in the opening story today was, “And then what will be my reward?” Talk about being rewarded for doing good works makes the average Lutheran nervous. It makes us uneasy, It has been pounded into our hearts and minds that we are saved by the grace of God alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone. That we can add nothing to what Christ has already done at the cross, in terms of earning the favor of God. And yet the Scriptures are clear as they can be that although we are saved by faith alone in Jesus Christ, faith never comes alone. Faith without good works is dead. Faith that saves is in fact, alive with holy desires to thank and to praise, to serve and obey. It is a holy desire to want to

be generous with our possessions, in response to Jesus giving up the riches of heaven and accepting the poverty of this world, to be our Savior.

In Luke 6, where Jesus promises, **“Give and it shall be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”**

Ask any long time Sunday School teacher to reflect on years and years of preparing and teaching children the Bible stories, and she will invariably say, “I got out of it more than I gave.” Spend time with any church members who have supported in a generous way the mission of the church for many years, and they will often declare that it has been a privilege to serve and to give and the Lord has been so very good to me over the years.

The rewards for following Jesus closely are rewards of grace, to be sure, but they are rewards. At least three kinds of rewards come to mind - the reward of personal satisfaction, the reward of meeting the needs of our neighbors, and most importantly, the reward of traveling through the ups and downs of life with the peace that only Jesus can give.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of Christians not too far away from the Gulf of Mexico full of folks who have their bad days, their good days, and their really good days.

On their bad days, their devotional life is weak or even non-existent, they worry about their pension plans, and they congratulate themselves on how hard they have worked and how secure a future they have provided for themselves.

On their good days, they confess their sins of complacency and self-centeredness to their God and one another. The grace of God sweeps over their collective souls, a humility rises up in their hearts, they follow Jesus so closely they start to sound and look like him, their thankfulness spills over in a contagious sort of a way into the lives of others.

On their really good days, they go looking for neighbors who need a listening ear and a helping hand. Their generosity towards others is in direct response to gifts of grace and mercy received from God. Even though a love for money keeps on knocking at the door of their hearts, their love for the One Who loved them first has a way of rising up and ruling the day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.