

Rich in God's Eyes
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Based on Luke 12:13-21
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“Nobody’s Happy!”

That was the title of the article in MONEY magazine.

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The magazine had done a survey of people with all different salary levels. One of the questions on the survey was, “Are you happy with your current level of income?”

The findings were this: that no matter how much a person was making, people said that a little more money would be better. A little more money would make their life happier, more satisfying. Even those who were making millions of dollars a year said that they wish they had more.

In the Gospel today, a man comes to Jesus wanting more. A brother felt that he was getting the short end of the stick with the family’s estate. “Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me,” he says to Jesus. Nothing will divide brothers and sisters more than dividing up an estate. So it was then, and so it is now. Jesus refused to get involved in a petty family squabble.

Jesus was concerned, however, with the larger implications of being preoccupied with the things of this world. Jesus knew that having more would not make the brother content. The survey in MONEY magazine reminds us of that truth. No matter how much we have, we always want more. We make ourselves believe that more money will make us happier.

In response to the man’s request, Jesus says “Be careful against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.” The value of one’s life is much more than one’s financial portfolio, Jesus says.

Jesus confronts the brother head on. You are living in sin, Jesus declares. Greed is controlling your life. Life is so much more than hoarding possessions. Your heart will only be satisfied when you develop a rich relationship with God.

It becomes very apparent that humans use a much different standard than God does to determine whether someone is rich. For Americans especially, to determine whether or not someone is rich we look at their financial portfolio.

But God doesn't look at our financial portfolio to determine whether or not we are rich. God looks at our heart. God looks at our priorities and motivations. God looks at the words we speak, how we treat others, how we choose to use our time and talents. The only way to be considered "rich" in the eyes of God is to live out the teachings of the Bible in our daily lives. We are rich in God's eyes when we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, when we make Christ ways our ways.

We soon realize that this parable Jesus tells us today is not about money. It is about priorities and values. It is about the first commandment – of putting God first in our lives and choosing to live out God's commands in our daily lives.

To help us examine our priorities and values, Jesus tells a parable of a rich farmer who had a crop which produced very, very abundantly. Growing up in a farm community, I learned that farmers could only do so much toward producing a bumper crop. They could plant at just the right time, and fertilize with the right amounts, but if God didn't provide ample amounts of rain at the right times, then the crops would not produce. I learned early on that an abundant harvest is a gift from God.

Jesus tells us that the harvest from this farmer's crops were so plentiful that the farmer had more than he knew what to do with. He had already filled all of his barns to capacity. "What should I do with the rest of my crops?" he asked himself.

"I know what I'll do!" the farmer exclaimed. "I'll build **larger** barns so that I can store all of my abundant harvest and never have to worry about anything ever again!" The farmer had more than enough, but he still wanted more.

Instead of giving thanks to God for his abundance, instead of sharing his God given blessings with those who were less fortunate, the farmer preoccupied himself with making sure he would be able to eat, drink, and enjoy himself for the rest of his life.

I'm sure you have seen the bumper sticker that reads, "The person who dies with the most toys wins." That was the mindset of this farmer. "The farmer with the largest barns wins." The farmer was no longer content with enough. He needed more than enough to feel secure. That's what greed is all about. We never have enough. We always need more. Instead of trusting God to provide for our needs, we start storing things up, just in case God doesn't come through.

Jesus calls this farmer a fool, not because he is successful or wealthy but because the farmer is so wrapped up in himself. He had placed his trust in his things rather than in God. Rather than praising God for blessing him with abundant crops and using his abundance for the glory of God, the farmer claims all the credit.

Did you notice how the farmer talks? I will build bigger barns. I will store my grain. I'll sit back and enjoy. In four short verses the rich man used the word "I" and "my" ten times! It's his way of saying, "Look what I did!" He stores up so much that he thinks he is invincible! He will never have to worry about anything ever again!

But then the unthinkable happens. The farmer dies unexpectedly. His life ends at a moment's notice.

Now... let's not read into this story something that is not there. The Bible does not say that the farmer's death is punishment from God for his greediness. Rather, Jesus reminds us how unpredictable life can be. There are no guarantees. It reminds us how precious each day is. Each day is a gift from God. None of us knows when our last day will be and so, ultimately, our relationship with God is the most valuable thing we have in life. The farmer had forgotten that we own nothing. All that we have, even life itself, is on loan from God.

What a difference it would have made if, instead of this farmer only investing in himself, he would have invested in the kingdom of God? What if, instead of this farmer storing his riches in barns, he would have stored his riches in the stomachs of the hungry, the backs of the naked, the minds of the uneducated? Then he would have been rich in God's eyes.

Jesus wants us to realize that God calls us to **be** more, not to **have** more. To borrow the Army's slogan, God calls us to "be all that we can be."

Believing that we are unconditionally loved by God, trusting that God will provide for our every need, we are freed to offer everything we have, just as Christ offered everything he had for us upon the cross. God has blessed each of us with amazing riches and talents – not just for our own benefit - but so that we can assist the Christian church on earth to faithfully share the story of God's love and grace with all people.

Remember when the Israelites were wandering in the desert? They quickly realized that they would never find food and water to sustain them on their journey. But what happened? God provided manna - a bread-like substance that fell from the sky to nourish them. God provided water that flowed from rocks in the desert.

Such gifts reminded them how much God loved them, that God cares enough to provide them with their daily bread. It reminded them that everything in life is a gift from God.

But just like that farmer, greed got the best of the Israelites. They began to gather much more than they could ever eat. "What if God doesn't send any manna tomorrow?" they asked themselves. "Then what will we eat?" The Israelites wanted to make sure that they were taken care of. Instead of trusting in God's promise that God would provide them with their daily bread, the Israelites took matters into their own hands. They decided to build bigger barns.

But the extra manna that the Israelites stored up rotted before they could eat it. In a very literal way, God was telling them that their greedy lifestyle was causing their life to rot.

"I will provide and care for you," God promises. From the very beginning, God's plan was that all people would have enough if those who have plenty would share their abundance with those in need. Instead of building bigger barns – hoarding for ourselves what God has first given us – God's vision is that we would share our abundant gifts with each other.

I pray that each of us will see the great responsibility God has placed upon us to share God's love with those who so desperately need it. It is a high calling. And the only way we can faithfully fulfill this Christian duty is to put our complete trust in God. We must order our priorities according to the ways of God. Then and only then will we become rich in the eyes of God.

I once met a woman who was very frugal in her spending. She saved every penny she could to make sure that she would have enough money into retirement. Once a year, when she would meet with her financial advisor, he would remind her the benefits of compound interest. He would encourage her to reinvest the interest she had earned. "That's how to make your money grow," the advisor said.

The woman was quick to reply, "I'm not interested in building bigger barns. God has given me more than enough. And the best way for me to say thanks is to invest in God's kingdom." And that she did. Every year, she would use the accrued interest and make some rather large donations to her church and other local agencies. I would say that woman was rich in the eyes of God.

I applaud the leadership of this congregation for choosing to invest in the Mission Investment Fund of the ELCA. That decision guards us against falling into the trap of wanting to build bigger barns. By investing in the Mission Investment Fund – which offers low-interest loans to mission congregations – we are choosing the ways of God over everything else. Through our support to the Mission Investment Fund, we are declaring that all we have is a gift from God. We own nothing. God is merely loaning us a portion of his great riches to faithfully manage. By investing in the mission of the church, I would say our congregation is choosing to be rich in the eyes of God.

Let's not allow how much money we have determine how rich we are. Let us use the Bible – God's Holy Word – to help us discern what it means to be rich in the eyes of God. Let us dare to trust that God will provide us with more than enough, allowing us freely offer ourselves, our time and our possessions for the sake of God's kingdom.

Let it be our mission to live our lives rich towards God.

Amen.