

What does it mean to be rich towards God?

This is the question that comes upon reading this passage from Luke—or one of the questions, anyway.

Our story begins with an appeal from someone in the crowd: *Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.* Set off by itself like it comes to us in the lectionary, it seems like an odd request. Why would this unknown person ask Jesus to arbitrate in a family matter? Is the brother even there to defend himself? At the beginning of chapter 12 we find Jesus speaking to the disciples in the midst of a crowd of thousands, so big that they were stepping on each other. If you read these verses it seems like a mishmash of random wisdom: *beware the Pharisees' hypocrisy* and *what you have said in the dark will be heard in the light* and *don't fear those who can kill the body but do fear the one who can cast you into hell* and various other things ending with *when they come to get you don't be afraid, the Holy Spirit will tell you what to say.* That last part, by the way, has always gotten my attention and was the source of much speculation among childhood friends and I—would someone, someday, come to get us? Would we have to defend our faith? If so, it would be ok—God would tell us what to say. Whew!

But then, as all of these things are being said, someone interrupts: *Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.* What the what? We can even see Jesus do a double take. *Who set me to be a judge or arbiter over you?* And I think what happens here is that it sort of changes the course of Jesus' teaching, because then he begins to talk about wealth and value and how we are to look at possessions. And of course he does so by telling them a parable:

The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "what should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he has an idea: I will tear down my old barns and build newer, bigger barns, and store all my grains and all my goods. And I will say to myself, "self, relax, eat, drink and be merry." But then God says to him, "You fool! Tonight your very life is being demanded of you. And the things you prepared, whose will they be?" So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.

And here we are, back to our original question: what does it mean to be rich towards God?

I think we know the basic premise here. Greed is not good. Hoarding all of your wealth for your own purposes is not good.

And yet, we also know that it isn't a sin to save for a rainy day. To build a retirement fund, say, or a cushion of funds to support yourself in case you lose your job. To have a little put back in case of

emergencies. This is good stewardship of the gifts that God has blessed us with—the ability to work to make money to support ourselves and save enough to take care of ourselves when we can't work or some other crisis happens. It's Biblical, even—remember that Joseph's dream led Pharaoh to store up grain to shield his people from famine.

So, why is this guy being called out for putting up grain that is his own?

Close attention to the passage reveals that he seems to have his, and only his, best interest at heart. There is no thought of the neighbor down the street who might need some grain; there is only *I have all this grain! Good for me!* When we read this parable we notice the pronouns: **I** have no place to store **my** crops...**I** will build bigger barns to store **my** grain...**I** will say to **myself** eat, drink and be merry. It's all very self-centered, self-oriented, isn't it? And not only does he not seem to care if anyone around him might need some grain, he doesn't acknowledge that God has a hand in this abundance. No *thanks be to God* from him, no thank offering to the one who created grain and gifted him with the ability to grow it in the first place. It's all *I grew this grain, it's all mine* and his biggest worry is how will he keep it for himself. Because we all know that grain goes bad if left too long and not stored properly. But there was no crisis coming, no people that this man was stocking up for.

And we come again to the question. What does it mean to be rich toward God? Putting up grain for yourself isn't bad, if you give attention to God's economy as well. God's economy in which the grain will benefit not only yourself but the people around you, your neighbors. God's economy in which we keep what we need and share the rest. God's economy in which we allow the Spirit of God to direct us in our use of resources, one of which may be grain.

It all comes down to recognizing God's providence—a good Presbyterian word, providence!—and recognizing that part of being blessed by God and accepting the blessings of God is first of all acknowledging that God is behind the good things that happen to us.

And this is hard for us in 21st century America, I think, as hard as it seems to have been for the man in Jesus' parable. We in the 21st century America have 200 years of self-reliance behind us, competing with relying on God. Even though we claim Christ as our own and say that we believe in God, in many ways we've largely relegated God to the sidelines when it comes to how we live, what we eat, drink, wear, what kind of house we have. The ethos of American life is steeped in individualism, individual achievement, individual freedom, with a bare minimum of lip service given to the one who created us, sustains us and undergirds all that we are and do.

This is one of those passages that doesn't seem to offer a lot of good news for us—but it is there. It's there because it shows us that we don't have to follow the world's teaching of selfishness and self-absorption. We don't have to worry about what we wear or eat because we are more precious to God than the lilies of the field or the ravens of the air. This passage is yet again an example of how Jesus turned the status quo on its head, pointing out the hypocrisy of those who claim to love God but don't act on that love. We who love God will be rich toward God, living lives reflective of the kingdom of God in which those who have riches share with those who don't, where love of neighbor equals love of self. In a way this parable is the illustration of the greatest commandments—loving God and loving neighbor. If we love God we will acknowledge God's providence and show our gratitude; if we love our neighbors as ourselves we will work for their good as well as our own—for economic good, social good, and yes, political good. In a world in which it seems that everyone is out for themselves, that too many of our leaders care only about remaining in power, regardless of the consequences; in a world in which the value of human life depends on its color, gender, and economic prowess, it is indeed good news that we don't have to follow this path, that in fact we are not to follow this path, that there is a better way, a way of life, of truth, of love.