

Luke 12:13–21 (NIV2011)

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

¹⁴Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” ¹⁵Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

¹⁶And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

¹⁸“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

²⁰“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

²¹“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

2 Corinthians 8:1-5, 7, 12, 24 (NRSV)

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us . . . ⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.

²⁴Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.

*Rich but foolish. How many people in our world might that describe?
How many of us?*

There are many lies we tell ourselves, sometimes thinking we do so in jest: “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” We think to ourselves that the statement pokes fun at our materialistic tendencies, a clever line not to be taken seriously. But I’m pretty sure that an alien studying our culture would conclude that these words on a bumper sticker encapsulate our life code. Just look at all our toys, all our stuff, even all the money we’ve managed to tuck away for our “financial security.”

But what’s all the stuff for? What good is it in the end? For the end always comes. Sadly, much sooner than expected for some. Steve Jobs had more toys and more money than almost anyone on the planet. Would he not gladly have given all that up to be alive?

Jesus told it like it is. I suppose many thought he was quite politically incorrect, though they hadn’t coined the term. Then as now, frankness and honesty can go down hard. “Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions,” Jesus told a group one day. Then he told them a story about a fool and his imagined “security.”

It is a short parable and pretty straightforward. As I gathered background material on the passage, I came across a commentary on it by Darrell Bock, who you sometimes see on Discovery Channel or National Geographic specials on the Bible. I thought he had some especially good points to make. Here is some of his analysis:

. . . The ancients knew, as moderns also know, that life consists of more than the accumulation of wealth. Scripture repeatedly warns against greed and includes it in lists of moral vices (Mk 7:22; Rom 1:29; Eph 4:19; 5:3; Col 3:5; 1 Tim 6:10; 2 Pet 2:3, 14; in the Old Testament, Job 31:24–25; Ps 49). The ancient historian Plutarch said, “Greed never rests from the acquiring of more” (*On Love of Wealth* 1 [Mor. 523 E]; L. T. Johnson 1991:198).

When possessions are the goal, people become pawns. In fact, a reversal of the created order occurs, as those made in the living image of God come to serve dead nonimages. It is this inversion of the created order that makes greed such a notorious sin; it is even called idolatry in some texts (Eph 5:3; Col 3:5). When I think of this story and its lesson, I picture a Buddha with a dollar attached to its stomach. For some, the material world is god. Many of us end up serving our dollars and bowing before their demands rather than relating sensitively to people. In the process relationships can be damaged and marriages destroyed. False worship involves bowing before something that is not worthy of honor and that cannot deliver life’s true meaning. The pursuit of wealth is the pursuit of false religion.

So Jesus tells an example parable, in which the example is negative. It involves the fortune of one man and how he handles that fortune. The man remains nameless, as is the normal pattern in such parables, because he represents a type of person. This farmer has a banner crop year. So great is the yield that he lacks storage space for it all. Rather than letting his resources waste away, he devises a plan to create more storage space. Now it is crucial to realize that the decisions the man makes to address his dilemma are perfectly normal and prudent, but the rationale, philosophy and desires that result from the decision are the problem.

This man believes that what he has is his in no uncertain terms. Several times in the next few verses he speaks in first-person terms about what he has: *my crops ... my barns ... my grain ... my goods ... myself*. There is no hint of an awareness of stewardship or responsibility to others as a result of his fortune. There is only self-interest. In his view he, like the famous American investment company, has made money the old-fashioned way—he has earned it! So after he stores his grain, he can relax into a totally self-indulgent life of ease: “*Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.*” The language recalls the biblical and Jewish texts of hedonism, as well as Greek culture (Eccl 8:15; Is 22:13; Tobit 7:10; *1 Enoch* 97:8–10; Euripides *Alcestis* 788–89). Almost every culture recognizes that using the creation for strictly selfish ends is a distortion.

As the man contemplates his future as one of the rich and famous, God has another account to render: the man is about to join the dead and departed. When God addresses the man as *fool*, he indicates the man’s blindness in judging life’s priorities. The man’s soul is being weighed in the balance. On that scale the possessions the man has and the social résumé he has built register no weight whatsoever. He cannot take these things with him to the bar of divine justice. Only his naked character will be on that balance. The man whose life is possessions makes himself a paperweight at the final judgment. The one who defines life in terms of possessions comes up empty when the time comes to assess whether eternal life will be gained. The parable ends on a note of tragedy: “*Who will get what you have prepared for yourself?*” One thing is for sure, his treasures will not be his anymore.

Jesus underscores this tragedy as he closes the parable with a final commentary: “*This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.*” Jesus’ point is that the seeker of wealth ends up with an empty soul and an empty life. Possessions are like “lite” beer; they may taste great, but they are really less filling.

All this teaching suggests the importance of proper priorities regarding possessions. They are a stewardship, not to be hoarded selfishly but to be used to benefit those around us. Jesus is not saying possessions are bad, but that the selfish pursuit of them is pointless. When the creation is inverted, the value of possessions is distorted. Those

who climb over people or ignore them in the pursuit of possessions will come up empty on the day God sorts out our lives. What a tragic misuse of the gift of resources this man had gained! What could have been an opportunity for generosity and blessing became a stumbling block to the soul.¹

Getting priorities right

The text box at the right gives you some important background to today's second Scripture passage. Paul is encouraging the Corinthian Christians to be generous and to support his collection for the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem. And he begins this lengthy section of the letter (chapters 8 & 9) by lifting up the Macedonian Christians as role models for the Corinthians.

The Macedonian Christians, principally those in Philippi and Thessalonica, are poor and suffering a severe ordeal. We don't know the specifics but times are tough. Now, their poverty doesn't mean that God hasn't blessed them or that his grace has been withheld. Rather, God's grace has been poured out on them. They are a joyful people whose extreme poverty has, paradoxically, overflowed in an extreme generosity that has made them wealthy – in the riches of Christ. Paul is raising money, yes, but the Macedonian Christians' generosity is unmatched. Their desire to share what little they have is so overwhelming that they beg Paul to take their money! . . . *stop there . . .* It is the *givers* who are begging, not Paul. They beg for the privilege of participating in this act of service to others.

Begging someone, even St. Andrew, to take my money hasn't been my pattern. I've been a willing giver, even enthusiastic at times. But *begging . . .* well, that image of these suffering Christians moves my heart. And don't you know Paul hopes that it moves the hearts of the Corinthians as well.

"First to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us" (v. 5)

The Macedonians surprised even Paul, giving beyond their means, begging for the privilege. But Paul knows that more than money is at play here. These Christians have given themselves "first to the Lord" and also to Paul ("to us").

Paul's Collection for Jerusalem

As Paul headed out on his missionary journey, all the leaders in Jerusalem ask of Paul and Barnabas is that they "remember the poor," which Paul is "eager to do" (Galatians 2:10). This seems at first glance like a general request, but we find in Paul's letters that this is actually a specific mission.

The "poor" in mind here are the poverty-stricken among the Christian community in Jerusalem, all of whom are Jews who have embraced Jesus as Messiah. Indeed, most scholars agree that poverty characterized the entire Christian community in Jerusalem. There were surely a variety of factors at work, such as persecution by the Jewish authorities and a series of bad harvests in the mid-forties AD. The Christians' practice of using capital to meet current needs (the selling of property described in Acts 4 and 5) may also have contributed.

In any event, Paul undertakes throughout his missionary travels to collect money that he and a large contingent of Gentile Christians plan to take to Jerusalem. It seems that his appeal met with little success in the churches of Galatia but, as in today's passage, was embraced beyond his expectations by the churches in Macedonia (i.e., Thessalonica and Philippi). The Christians in Corinth had made a commitment to the collection and Paul urges them to follow through on their commitment (2 Corinthians 8:10-11).

Paul embraces this collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem as an act of compassion, but also as enacted theology. For Paul, the collection is a concrete way of demonstrating the unity of the church – Gentile believers helping out Jewish believers. Paul knows with how suspiciously many Jewish believers have viewed his ministry to the Gentiles. When not the specific subject at hand, these divisions are an important subtext in many of Paul's letters. Paul preaches unity, but he is a wise man who knows that money can sometimes talk louder than words.

¹ Bock, D. L. (1994). *Luke*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Lk 12:13). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Paul opens 2 Corinthians by referring to himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God.” The Macedonians have accepted this and submitted themselves to Paul’s leadership. Paul disavows any right to domineer over these Christians (1:24) and emphasizes that he exercises his authority for good (10:8; 3:10), for building up these communities of faith. The Macedonians’ giving is not primarily a response to the Gospel nor it is an outgrowth of their prayer. Rather, their response to the collection demonstrates, as Martin puts it, that the power of the Lord at work in Paul’s ministry justifies the collection itself.²

Thus, it is a fair question to ask whether we see the power of Christ at work in St. Andrew. If we do, then the only response can be enthusiastic generosity. If we do not, then we have to ask ourselves whether we are the community God intends us to be.

Excelling in everything (v.7)

After pointing the Corinthians toward the generosity of the Macedonian Christians, Paul urges them to consider the many gifts that God has showered upon them. Evidently, these house churches are filled with some talented and gifted people. They excel in many things; Paul wants them to excel in generosity as well. It is a bit like the old adage about much being expected of those to whom much is given. One need only walk around St. Andrew any day to realize how apt these words are for us.

“According to what one has” (v.12)

After encouraging the Corinthians to follow the example of Christ, he urges them to finish what they started. They had made a commitment to support his collection and they are to follow through. Paul assures them that he is not asking for a super-human effort. He knows that people vary in their means. Some of the Corinthians have a lot of money, others do not. Each person should give according to their means, giving out of what they do have, not out of what they don’t have. As he goes on to say in the letter, Paul is not asking for anything other than fairness among the entire Christian community. Those who have money now, sharing with those who don’t, knowing that the tables could well be reversed some day.³ Paul hopes that the Corinthians will be eager givers – based on what they have.⁴

“The proof of your love” (v. 24)

Too many churches make the mistake of dancing around the issue of money, acting apologetic each time it is necessary to fund the next year’s ministries. Paul doesn’t dance. He unabashedly urges the Corinthians to show the other churches the proof of their love. Paul has boasted about the Corinthians and he knows that their generosity that will show that his boasting was well-founded.

Time and again we see in Paul’s letters 100% confidence in his Lord, in the Gospel, in his own calling, and in his work. He doesn’t seek any half-hearted giving to support a half-hearted ministry. Paul desires robust, eager, and sacrificial giving that reflects the Lord and Gospel that Paul proclaims.

The Macedonian Christians have gotten their priorities right, forsaking even their meagerly-filled barns for generous living. They stand in stark contrast with the rich fool of Jesus’ parable for they are being “rich toward God” in their generosity. May the same thing be said of us all.

²from Ralph Martin’s commentary on 2 Corinthians in the *Word Biblical Commentary*.

³Earlier, Paul had even helped them learn how to give, putting something aside each week, so that they wouldn’t have to take a giant collection when he came (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Paul is the picture of a practical pastor.

⁴The biblical tithe follows this. Because it is a percentage of income, those with more give more. I’m sure Paul would be happy to see us all follow John Wesley’s example of giving away everything above what he needed to live – “progressive tithing” we might call it. After the success of *A Purpose-Driven Life*, Rick Warren and his wife live off 10% of what he makes and gives away 90%, turning the tithe on its head, in addition to having repaid every bit of salary the church ever paid him.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The following questions are taken from the booklet 40 Day Spiritual Journey to a More Generous Life that our church is using during this series. I hope you'll pick up a copy and read the devotions daily.

1. What financial situation did you grow up with (i.e. not enough money, just made ends meets, more than enough, it varied, etc.)?
2. What did your parents do, if anything, to help train you to manage your finances?
3. What was the most painful or difficult financial experience you ever recall going through?
4. Have you ever intentionally curtailed your normal spending in order to be more generous to the Lord's work? If so, when?
5. What was the best financial advice or teaching you've ever received (from reading, seminars/conferences, personal example, or personal advice)?
6. What is one thing you spend your money on that is unhealthy for you or is a waste of money?
7. What is something you bought on impulse that you realized later you didn't really need?
8. If you begin to experience tough times financially, will you try to take care of your own needs first or will you make sure you first give to God from whatever minimal resources you have available? Why?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 35:4-29 Everyone brings their best stuff to build God's tabernacle.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Proverbs 16:16 & 17:16 A fool and his money</p>
<p>Wednesday, Psalm 78:1-8 Teaching our children about the faithfulness and generosity of God.</p>	<p>Thursday, Philippians 4:11-12 Learning to be content with whatever our circumstances.</p>
<p>Friday, Revelation 3:14-22 The Christians in Laodicea think they are wealthy for they do have lots of money. But they are fools.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

Connecting the Dots: Genesis to Revelation **An Introduction to the Bible**

Through Monday, November 12, Scott Engle is teaching a four-week-long church-wide Bible study on Monday evenings. We are meeting in Wesley Hall from 7:00 to 8:30.

This is be an introduction to the Bible and the over-arching biblical story.

Each week's presentation will stand on its own, so please come even if you've missed some weeks.

Everyone who attends receives a free copy of the 62-page *Connecting the Dots* book.

The series will be suitable for youth and adults.

Childcare available – make reservations at www.standrewumc.org

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in **Piro Hall** on Tuesdays (a new room).

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The class is often led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

Scott is teaching the current series:

Talking about Jesus with Scoffers, Sceptics, and the Indifferent.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org.

Sermon Notes
