

The Parable of the Rich Fool



Luke 12:16–21

The Parable of the Rich Fool: Rich in Barns, Poor before God

Setting the Scene

Jesus is teaching a large crowd when a man interrupts him: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me” (**Luke 12:13**). The request sounds practical, even reasonable. In first-century Jewish life, inheritance was often the main source of wealth, and rabbis were sometimes asked to settle family disputes. Jesus refuses the role of estate lawyer. He will not become “a judge or arbitrator” over the brothers (v. 14). Instead, he turns the interruption into a warning for everyone present: “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (v. 15).

Then he tells a story.

The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, “What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?” 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. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” But God said to him, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. (**Luke 12:16–21**, ESV)

The parable is short, almost spare. There is no dialogue with neighbors, no mention of workers, no poor at the gate. The rich man speaks only to himself. God speaks once. That is enough.

Context

Luke places this parable in a teaching section on fear, confession, the Holy Spirit, and the coming judgment (**Luke 12:1–12**). Immediately after the story, Jesus tells his disciples not to be anxious about food and clothing, because life is more than these things and the Father knows what they need (**12:22–34**). The parable therefore sits between two related dangers: the greed that hoards and the anxiety that grasps. Both treat the self as the center of security.

The story is unique to Luke. That is no accident. Luke's Gospel repeatedly returns to wealth, poverty, and the use of goods: the Magnificat, the woes on the rich, the Good Samaritan, Lazarus and the rich man, Zacchaeus, the rich ruler. Luke is not merely moralizing about money. He is asking who owns a human life and what a life is for.

The man's problem is not that the land produced well. Abundance itself is not condemned. The harvest is a gift of the ground—and, by implication, of God. The problem is what the man does with the gift once it arrives. **He treats surplus as a private storage problem rather than a public and spiritual question of stewardship.**

Observations

The man is already rich. The parable does not describe a poor farmer who finally gets a break. He already has barns. The crisis is overflow. Success, not scarcity, exposes him.

He reasons only with himself. “He thought to himself... And he said... I will say to my soul.” The pronouns are almost all first person. There is no “we,” no neighbor, no God in the planning session. Augustine and later Luther described sin as the heart curved in on itself (*incurvatus in se*). The rich fool is a portrait of that curve. His world has shrunk to the size of his barns.

He addresses his own soul as if he owned it. “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” In Scripture, the soul is life received, not property managed. The man speaks to his *psyche* as a manager speaks to an employee. God answers by reclaiming what was never the man's to keep: “This night your soul is required of you.” The Greek suggests a demand, a calling in of what was on loan.

God names him “fool.” In biblical usage, a fool is not merely unintelligent. The fool is the one who lives as if there were no God (Psalm 14:1). The rich man is a practical atheist. He plans “many years” without asking whether those years belong to him. His calendar has no room for death or for the One who gives and takes life.

The question that follows is devastating. “The things you have prepared, whose will they be?” The goods remain. The owner does not. Inheritance—the very issue that started the conversation—returns as irony. Someone else will take what he stored. He cannot take it with him, and he never asked whether it was meant to stay with him in the first place.

The application is general. “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” Jesus does not say, “So is the one who is rich.” He says the one who stores for

himself and is not rich *toward God*. The contrast is directional. Treasure can move inward or Godward. The same surplus can become a barn or an offering.

Being “rich toward God” is not defined in a single sentence here, **but Luke’s wider witness is clear enough**: gratitude that names God as Giver; generosity toward the poor; treasure in heaven rather than on earth; a life that does not serve Mammon. The following verses about ravens and lilies press the same point from the other side: if God feeds birds that keep no barns, anxiety and hoarding are both forms of unbelief.

Questions

The parable leaves several questions open on purpose. They are meant to work on the hearer.

- When abundance comes, do I first ask, “Where shall I store this?” or “For whom is this given?”
- Whom do I consult when I plan the future—only myself, or the God who may require my soul tonight?
- What would it mean, in concrete terms, to be rich toward God with the particular surplus I actually have—time, money, skill, influence?
- Is my sense of security located in what I have laid up, or in the Father who knows I need these things?
- If my life were required tonight, whose would the prepared things be—and would that fact grieve me or relieve me?
- How much of my planning is a way of saying to my soul, “Relax, you are safe,” without asking whether that soul is still mine to command?

These are not questions for “the rich” as a class. **They are questions for anyone who treats life as a storage problem rather than a trust.**

Conclusion

The Parable of the Rich Fool is not a condemnation of planning, farming, or even wealth. **It is a judgment on a life that has no horizon beyond the self.** The man is called a fool not because he had a good harvest, but because he mistook the harvest for the meaning of his life and mistook his life for his own possession.

Jesus’ word to the man in the crowd—and to every later reader—is that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Life consists in being rich toward God: receiving what is given as a gift, holding it with open hands, and remembering that both the goods and the soul that enjoys them can be required at any hour.

The barns we build may be larger than his. God’s sentence has not changed.

