

Taking Stock of Life

The Old Testament reading and the Gospel frequently follow the same themes. Ecclesiastes 2:17-26 and the parable about the rich fool (Lk 12:13-21) present the positive and negative views of life. The theme of the Ecclesiastes comes in 1:2, “‘Meaningless, Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’” In Eccl 2:17-26 also the word “meaningless” comes up five times. The work that is done under the sun is grievous, meaningless, a chasing after the wind. People must leave what they toil for, even with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, to those who come after them. They don’t know whether their successors will be wise men or fools. It is meaningless that people toil and strive anxiously, with pain and grief, so that their minds don’t rest even at night.

There is a positive side of the book Ecclesiastes, and it is expressed in 2:24-26: “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases Him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner He gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

Paul tells us both the cause of this meaninglessness and God’s solution to it. God subjected the world to this frustration when He delivered His sentences on Eve and Adam after the fall into sin. God’s remedy is that both the believers, the children of God, and the creation, which was subjected to frustration when God cursed the earth because of man, will be liberated. The creation will share in Christ’s redemption, because He will liberate it from its bondage to decay. Living things will no longer be subject to death and decay, as they are today. Believers, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, eagerly wait for the adoption as children of God, and the redemption of their bodies. They have a future inheritance, which will be fully realised when Jesus returns.

There are clear links between the reading in Ecclesiastes and Jesus’ parable about the rich fool. If we look at life only from the standpoint of this world, the positive side is that people can find pleasure in their work, food, drink, and relaxation. These are gifts from God. They can use their wisdom, knowledge, and skill in their work. Though Jesus calls the rich man in L 12 a fool, people of this world would generally consider him smart. He saw his opportunities, made his plans, spat on his hands, and got to work. Jesus doesn’t say that he was a wicked man, a cheat, thief, adulterer or murderer. He was a fool because he laid down plans for many years to come to lean back and enjoy the results of his success. He didn’t count on the possibility that God would take his life that very night. Then it didn’t really matter who would take over what he had built up. It would be anyone but him.

Jesus makes another important point. The things that can come between a person and his God aren’t only wicked crimes, but the noble things: a man’s skill and expertise, the qualifications that he has put together as a kind of assurance against the future, his wisdom, knowledge, energy, and practical resourcefulness. They are traps when they become a person’s chief treasures, with the result that he is not rich toward God. So the smart man was a fool. Although he was a rich man, he didn’t know how poor he was, or how he could find true riches.

Jesus told this parable in response to a man’s request to intervene so that he got his proper share of his father’s inheritance from his brother. Selfish desire for material things drove the man along. We can interpret Jesus’ general statement, “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things one possesses” in several directions. One is assurance. Even if a person has many possessions, they don’t make his life secure. Another is that it is God who supports life and allows it to continue. Even if a person has many possessions, they can’t sustain his life.

This message doesn’t only fit farmers who plan to increase their production and storage. The parable covers our abilities and qualifications in all sorts of areas, on which we tend to rely as security from worry about the future. The more we reflect on Jesus’ parable about the rich fool, the more we realise that fear about the future controlled what the man did. Sometimes fear of poverty and financial crisis paralyses people. However, it can have the opposite effect. It can drive them on into a flurry of expansion, planning, and purposeful, practical activity. From a standpoint of worldly wisdom, that is the best way of providing for future security. However, it can come at a dreadful price.

In minor things, like deciding which television show to watch, we ask, “What’s on? What’s it about? Who are the chief actors?” With major things in life we often don’t serve our best interests well. When God does His final accounting, how shall we answer the questions: “Who are you?” “What was your life about?” “Who was the chief Actor in it?”

That leads us to a verse later in Luke chapter 12. “Provide yourselves money bags that do not grow old, a

treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches or moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Often in Jesus’ parables He makes no reference to Himself, and we must see how He is pointing to Himself. He wants to be our precious treasure, our redemption, justification, and, in short, our Lord and God. The rich, smart man was a fool and spiritually poor. We are rich toward God through what we could not accomplish of ourselves by all our wise and practical efforts, simply by receiving His salvation. Our lives are rich when we live them in gratitude to God for His gifts, when we closely relate them to Him as the Giver. Our lives are rich when we take the attitude: “The more worries and anxieties I have, the more I can off-load onto Him.” The person who is rich toward God awakes each morning to a renewed surprise, that there really is such a person as Jesus Christ, who has redeemed his life from futility, given him hope, and continues to take an interest in him and cares for him. The person who is rich toward God readily admits that he is often weak and disloyal, but he knows that Jesus Christ is faithful to all His promises, and will never be disloyal to him. His song is:

Jesus, priceless treasure,
Fount of purest pleasure,
Truest friend to me:
Ah, how long in anguish
Shall my spirit languish,
Yearning, Lord, for Thee?
Thou art mine
O Lamb divine;
I will suffer naught to hide Thee,
Naught I ask beside Thee.