

## THE SNARE OF MATERIALISM

When we read Jesus' parable about the rich fool in Luke 12, we acknowledge that it is not wrong for someone to be concerned about his proper share of an inheritance. It was not wrong in principle for this farmer to plan to increase his storage space. Although God's commandment not to steal protects private property, disputes about property belong in the civil courts. Jesus had more important work than arbitrating claims about property. The trouble about the rich fool in the parable, who planned to put up bigger grain storage, was materialism. He concentrated completely on his life in this world and neglected his relationship to God.

There is a great deal of material greed in our society. The anti-capitalist protestors at Genoa recently were themselves not free of greed and envy. Greed besets people who have plenty and people who have little. Gambling enterprises trap people with dreams of greater wealth and what it could bring. Our society measures success and greatness by what people possess. We must not think that, because wealth has not increased for us in the way it did for this man in the parable, this parable has nothing to say to us. The lesson against setting one's heart on possessions applies to the person who would like to have more than he has. In times when finances are tight because of the present prolonged dry weather, and when costs are high and prices are low, of course we are concerned about making ends meet. When we have costly breakages to have repaired we resent having to layout money for them. It is often a struggle to keep going. However, both desires for more and actually having more may both become snares.

What makes refusing to rely on our possessions or rely on our performance harder for us is that our society focuses on material things, bodily health and property. Television advertisements bring this right into our living rooms. The daily news regularly keeps us posted on the economy, and on the value of our dollar. As a result we easily think less about God's economy of salvation. In medieval times people were encouraged to fast for spiritual reasons. Now we are encouraged to diet for bodily reasons. Then people were encouraged to go on spiritual pilgrimages, now they are encouraged to go jogging for bodily benefit or travel abroad for a holiday. Like the man in the parable, we are performance-oriented, and we keep scores, using property, success, and physical health as the measuring sticks. What is the result? We are insecure and anxious. We think that in spiritual matters, too, the important things are that we improve ourselves.

Jesus refused to intervene in getting the man his just share of an inheritance. He said, "*Man, who appointed Me to be a judge or an arbitrator over you?*" That does not mean that God does not care about greedy hearts. His Word points straight at them, because, where greed rules, our fear of Him, our love for Him, and our trust in Him are damaged. Jesus said, "*A person's life does not consist in how plentiful his possessions are.*" All of us should beware of covetousness.

This foolish rich man did not think about using his wealth to serve either God or his fellowmen, particularly poor people, whom he might have helped. When his crops had yielded well, his one thought was storing them safely and giving himself over to enjoying life. What was wrong with him? What is extraordinary in this parable is that God speaks directly to the foolish rich man. He had forgotten four things: that God was the Giver, that he, the rich man, was only a caretaker of his riches; that the soul cannot live by riches, and that death can quickly take people away from their possessions.

This man in the parable thought of nothing but enjoyment. Our modern life has increased the scope for various kinds of enjoyment, with organized sport at many age-levels, many forms of entertainment that were not available years ago, the computer games, and the holiday packages that quick travel has made possible.

This man in the parable addressed himself as "*Soul.*" He talked to himself, as he was aware of his desire for contentment and pleasure. When his physical life was demanded from him, he was found to have neglected his real treasure, real peace in the age to come.

God said to him, "*You fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you.*" "*Fool*" is a very strong word. He was a fool in a spiritual sense. While he was still planning his happiness, security and certainty, based on material possessions, God summoned him away. In his plans for the future he had neglected the possibility that death might intervene.

We should not trust either in ourselves or in things outside ourselves. Jesus teaches us that there is danger in inordinate desire for worldly possessions and seeking security because of them. When possessions increase or are improved, we must not set our hearts on them, as though they were ultimate, or the basis of our standing before God. The real trap is neglecting the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and failing to trust in God's promise that all these other things will be added as well. Trusting in material possessions is an enemy to trust in God.

Therefore, each of us should ask, “What are my priorities? Getting the experience that will serve on a portfolio reference towards getting a better job? Working higher up in the company?” In the section that follows this, Jesus says, “*Life is a greater thing than food, and the body is a greater thing than clothing.*” He asks, “*If you cannot do even the smallest thing, why do you worry about the rest?*”

The question “*Then who will get the things that you have prepared?*” hits the successful farmer like a stroke of lightning. “*Whoever will be the owner of your riches, it will certainly not be you.*”

Often the person whose life is a misery through bad health, and through a continual struggle to make ends meet is far more aware of what his faith at the end of life in this present age means for life in the age to come.

The crucial point in this parable is the sad consequence in the age to come for the person who has neglected the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Although we should not trust in things outside us, we should trust in God’s verdict of acquittal, for the sake of Jesus, who is outside us. Our certainty before God must always be thrown back on God Himself and on His gracious verdict of justification over us sinners for Jesus’ sake. Our security must never rest on anything we are, anything we have, or anything we have done, but on what comes from our gracious God. Our certainty should rest on Jesus’ obedience, outside ourselves, which reaches us through His Word, which precedes faith and renewal, and through absolution, through Baptism, and through the Lord’s Supper. The basis of our spiritual certainty is not in us, but outside us, not things outside us, but in Jesus Christ, the Person outside us.

That is also the reason for the important difference between doctrine and life. Our lives and the things that support them we think of as ours. Our share in righteousness, justification, and life, for Christ’s sake, cannot come from ourselves. The doctrine of the Gospel belongs to God, and faith must rest on that. Not even love in us must cause doctrine to give way. If doctrine gives way to love to our fellow human beings, love to God, and the Gospel of God’s love to us will certainly be denied.

There is no salvation apart from the obedience of Jesus Christ, outside us. The only treasures that are safe are the ones that make us rich in our relations to God, and these do not lie in ourselves, much less in what we possess; but they boomerang back to God Himself. God wants us, to throw the burden of proof for our righteousness back on Himself, back on His own verdict of acquittal over us for Christ’s sake, outside of ourselves. Since His work is the basis of our certainty before God, may God fix our hearts on the redemption of Jesus Christ, which is outside of ourselves, and on His Word, His absolution, and His assurances and gifts to us in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. May God preserve us as people who are certain and secure because of Jesus’ work for us. May He also free our hearts from being greedy *for* temporal possessions, as well as from relying on our spiritual achievements!