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## Through the Needle's Eye

By David Servant

### Chapter One

#### The Death of a Wealthy Fool

Luke 12:13-34

If you are reading this, that is a good indication that your heart is open to be challenged. Now your journey toward true joy begins, and it begins at the only place it can, by honestly considering what Jesus said.

We'll start with His words found in Luke 12:13-34, which include His parable of the rich fool, and we'll be challenged to examine our own lives in light of what He taught. We'll probably feel guilt, but as I stated in the introduction, there is no other way. We'll also be tempted to find a way to resolve our guilt by some means other than confession and repentance. Thus we must be wary of inconsistent, illogical "explanations" we've previously heard that soften what Jesus said or help us understand "what He really must have meant." Let's read slowly and honestly:

And someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over you?" And He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' And he said, 'This is what I will do: 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 many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

And He said to His disciples, "For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body than clothing. Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and they have no storeroom nor barn; and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why are you anxious about other matters? Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory

did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you, O men of little faith! And do not seek what you shall eat, and what you shall drink, and do not keep worrying. For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things. But seek for His kingdom, and these things shall be added to you. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves purses which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:13-34).

Imagine for a moment, Jesus preaching to thousands of people (see 12:1), a multitude that consisted of His followers and the curious. Within the crowd stood a man who felt he'd been treated unfairly by his brother in regard to the family inheritance. We don't know if he had been defrauded of his entire share or if he simply felt that his half wasn't as large as his brother's. Neither do we know his brother's side of the story; he may have had some good justification for his apparently selfish actions. Regardless, the outspoken man had hopes that Jesus would settle their dispute. Perhaps he thought that if this very popular rabbi publicly rendered judgment in his favor, it would force his brother to acquiesce. So he said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13).

Jesus, however, refused to get involved in the man's dispute, asking him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over you?" (Luke 12:14). Jesus didn't believe it was His place to render a decision in the matter. And He certainly didn't have the time to listen to both sides of the story, oversee an appraisal of every item in the estate, and then determine who got what. He had much more important things to do.

Jesus did, however, seize the opportunity to warn of a much more serious matter that had surfaced. A danger flag was waving that He wanted everyone to see. Greed was rearing its ugly head. This man was much too preoccupied with getting his inheritance, evidenced by his publicly speaking evil of his own brother and his inappropriate, ill-timed and even foolish request of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Just imagine seeing someone walk up to a preacher at the end of his sermon and publicly say to him, "Preacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me!" You would conclude that such a person was overly occupied with his inheritance.

Jesus then said to the crowd, "*Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions*" (Luke 12:15).<sup>2</sup>

Let's consider several very significant points of that divinely-uttered statement.

#### **Four Significant Points**

First, note the unmistakable connection Jesus drew between greed and a person thinking that his life consists of his possessions. The two are intrinsically linked. When a person becomes convinced that life is about material possessions, whether he has many or few, greed becomes an inevitable and normally irresistible temptation. If one's joy is

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<sup>1</sup> A friend has suggested that Jesus may have been thinking about the man's brother as being the one who was guilty of greed. I will admit that is a possibility, but because of Jesus' refusal to arbitrate the dispute, I doubt that He would have jumped to a conclusion about the man's brother after hearing only one side of the story. Also, there is no proof within the text that Jesus' warning against greed was spoken in reference to the man's brother, while there is certainly some evidence to suggest that the man who made the request was in danger of yielding to greed. Regardless, Jesus' subsequent warning about greed had application to the man, his brother, the crowd that day, and everyone since then. Greed is often the reason that people fight over inheritances and money.

<sup>2</sup> The *King James Version* translates the last part of Jesus' statement in 12:15 slightly different: "For a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

found in the ownership of possessions, he will soon become discontent with what he has, and will then devote himself to the pursuit of gaining more. Money then becomes His master, directing his life. It will lead him along selfish paths, away from what his life's pursuit should be. This leads us to the next point.

If one's life does not consist of his possessions, then there must be something else in life of greater importance. What is it? Jesus makes that very clear in the remainder of this passage. The pursuit of one's life should be knowing, loving, enjoying and pleasing His Creator, or as Jesus puts it, being "rich toward God" (12:21). Our life's focus should not be for what is material, but for what is spiritual. We should "seek for His kingdom" (12:31), just as Jesus said.

The greedy man in this story was standing among a crowd that was listening to a live sermon by God in the flesh, but all he could think of was gaining more material wealth via his inheritance! What a pity! Many pastors know the pain of having one of their parishioners ask some trite question of them immediately after a sermon in which they had poured out their hearts. Such pastors may be smiling on the outside, but inwardly they are groaning, realizing that their impassioned message obviously had no effect upon *that* attendee. That example, however, pales in comparison to someone asking the Son of God, perhaps even interrupting Him during His sermon, to settle a dispute about an inheritance. This man was spiritually dull to say the least.

A third point that can be derived from Jesus' warning is that greed stalks rich and poor alike. Note that He said, "Not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15, emphasis added). If I said, "Not even when one owns many cows does he find true happiness," my declaration has application to those who own no cows as well as those who own many cows. In fact, it would seem that my words were addressed to those with few cows. Those who have little are often just as deceived as those who have much, thinking that life consists of possessions. Jesus would shortly elaborate on greed's deception of rich and poor as He continued His discourse.

A fourth and final point that surfaces is that greed is something that we must beware and stand guard against, just as Jesus said. Greed never announces its arrival, but rather slithers silently into one's heart like a snake. It always looks for opportunities, such as when inheritances are received. Unguarded hearts are easily infiltrated, and *the person who believes that life consists of possessions might as well have a welcome mat laid out for greed*. Moreover, once greed has taken up residence in a heart, it specializes in making itself invisible to the heart's owner, hiding behind an innumerable number of smokescreens. Only God's Word and Spirit are able to expose its presence.

### **When the Greedy Define Greed**

If we are to obey Jesus' commandment to beware of greed, we must first be able to identify it. And that presents a problem. Too often we define greed like Mafia mobsters define evil people, never suspecting that they themselves exemplify the true definition. We similarly define greed with a strong cultural bias and without reference to God's standards. For example, Webster defines greed as "excessive desire for getting or having, especially wealth; desire for more than one needs or deserves."

By this definition, I wonder, *How can I determine if I'm greedy?* Can anyone tell me what constitutes a desire for wealth that is excessive? How many people would consider their desire for wealth to be excessive? We may judge others as having an excessive desire for wealth, but we would never judge our own desire for wealth as being excessive.

And if greed is the "desire for more than one needs or deserves," how much does one need? And how does one determine what he deserves? You can see how just about anyone who reads this somewhat vague, modern definition of greed might easily

appraise himself as not being guilty. Webster has indeed accurately defined greed by the modern usage of the word, because no one considers himself or herself to be greedy.

Not only is our modern definition of greed very vague, it is also often inconsistent. We sometimes fool ourselves by supposing that greed is a sin that can be committed only by the ultra-rich, or by those who gain their money immorally or illegally. Yet we tell our children not to be greedy in relationship to cookies in a cookie jar. We know that it is selfish for one child to eat the three remaining cookies when that child's brother and sister are equally desirous of one. And such selfishness we call greed—"Don't be greedy, Johnny! Just eat one cookie!" Obviously, we don't really believe that greed is a sin that can only be committed by the ultra-rich or by those who gain their wealth immorally or illegally. We know otherwise. We intuitively understand that what makes greed wrong is the way it affects others, those who don't get the cookies that we gorge. It has something to do with inequality.

There is another way by which we fool ourselves through a customary definition of greed. It is commonly believed that greed is only an attitude of the heart and that it has nothing to do with our actions. We imagine that we can accumulate and keep as much as we want, just as long as we don't allow greed into our hearts. We might just as well claim that hatred is only an attitude of the heart that has nothing to do with actions. Could it be rightly said that there is nothing wrong with murdering another person just as long as the murderer doesn't allow hatred into his heart? Greed is indeed an attitude of one's heart, but one that manifests itself by actions. We would never tell our children, "Go ahead and eat all the cookies while your siblings go without any—but just make sure you do it without an attitude of greed!"

### **Greed Biblically Defined**

How does God define greed? That is what matters. When the Bible speaks of greed, should we assume that Webster's definition is valid? What makes greed wrong in God's eyes?

As we progress in our study of Scripture, God's definition of greed will become increasingly clearer to us. Most fundamentally, however, greed is a violation of the two greatest commandments ever given to humanity—to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind and to love one's neighbor as one's self (see Matt. 22:36-39).

Greedy people do not love their neighbors as themselves—they love themselves and ignore their neighbors. They take for themselves what belongs to their neighbors or they keep for themselves what they should share with their neighbors. It is just that simple. How could one not be guilty of greed if he lives in self-indulgence while he knows that his brother is starving? Please pause and think about this, as there is no escaping its truthfulness.

Neither do greedy people love God as He should be loved because material things have usurped His rightful place. Money is directing their lives, not God. They are finding their happiness in their possessions, not in knowing, loving, enjoying and pleasing Him (not to mention that they are also blatantly disobeying His second most important commandment). Nothing competes with God for the hearts of people like money and possessions, which is no doubt why Jesus warned that one can't serve God and money (see Matt. 6:24). If money is one's master, God is not.

Of course, people don't actually serve money; they serve themselves by what they do with their money. Paul warned that people in the last days would be, first of all, "lovers of self, lovers of money" (2 Tim. 3:2, emphasis added). It is interesting that Paul places these two loves right beside each other. The love of money is really the love of self.

Greed indicates that self is on the throne of one's heart and that God is not. Jesus is not Lord of greedy people, which is precisely why Scripture tells us that greed is equivalent to idolatry (see Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). In God's eyes, greedy and covetous people are just

like those who bow before false gods. In this case, however, they are bowing before photographs of themselves. These kinds of people are not God's people, even if they claim to be. The Bible warns that greedy/covetous people will not inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Eph. 5:3-6). There is no such thing as a greedy Christian. Greedy people are not Christians. Greedy people don't go to heaven. That is why it is so crucial to examine ourselves in this matter, to put it mildly.

All this being so, Jesus, who loves everyone, is concerned about anyone yielding to greed's temptation, which is why He so earnestly warned the crowd that day. The outspoken man, in particular, was in dire danger of gaining an inheritance at the expense of forfeiting any hope of eternal life. What a tragic error.

### **The Similarities Between Greed and Covetousness**

While we're beginning to search for a biblical definition of greed, let's also take a minute to consider the sin of covetousness, also mentioned in the New Testament. How does it differ, if at all, from greed?

In the original Greek language of the New Testament, there is little obvious difference in meaning between the two words most often translated *greed* and *covetousness*. In fact, the Greek word that is most often translated *greed* (pleonexia) is derived from the root word that is most often translated *covetous* (pleonektes). Additionally, even pleonexia is sometimes translated *covetousness* or *coveting* (for example, see Mark 7:22 and 2 Cor. 9:5 in the NASB). The *King James Version* translates pleonexia as *covetousness* in Jesus' warning about greed that we're currently considering: "Take heed, and beware of covetousness (pleonexia)" (Luke 12:15). All of this indicates that even Bible translators have difficulty finding any discernible difference in meaning between the words that are most often translated *greed* and *covetousness* in the New Testament.

In the English language, greed and covetousness share very similar meanings. Both terms are meaningless apart from people's relationships with others. Both express a desire to possess what rightfully does or should belong to another. Although I may not jealously desire what another person currently possesses (commonly thought of as covetousness), I may be wrongfully keeping in my possession what God wants me to share with another (which is one manifestation of greed). For example, if God entrusts me with money to feed a starving person and I keep that money for myself, I'm greedy. I'm keeping for myself what should belong to someone else. Again, pause and think about this, for there is no escaping its truthfulness.

### **Back to Our Story...**

Jesus continued His warning against greed that day by relating a story of a rich man who yielded to greed and died soon after. May I refresh your memory by quoting it again:

The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, "What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?" And he said, "This is what I will do: 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 many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?" So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God (Luke 12:16-21).

The rich man in this parable is an example of a man who thought his life consisted of his possessions. That is, the primary pursuit in his life was the acquiring and selfish

enjoyment of material things. Eating, drinking, and pleasure were what he worked and lived for. And with a little help from the weather his hard work paid off. He found himself with more crops and goods than he had barns in which to store them. Then, as is the case every time one finds himself with more than he needs, greed tempted him. His prosperity made it possible for him to retire long before he became elderly or unable to work. Now his ultimate dream could be realized—he could selfishly enjoy the remaining years of his life without having to labor. Every day would be a party. He would have been the envy of almost everyone who knew him.

God, however, considered the man to be a fool, and there are at least four reasons for such an appraisal.

First, the rich man thought only of himself when he considered what to do with his prosperity. He made his decision as if he were the only person in the world. It never occurred to him to think of those who had little or no food. He didn't love his neighbor as himself. He only loved himself. He acted selfishly.

Second, the rich man thought of his life only in terms of its earthly duration, and not its eternal duration. As Jesus said, he laid up treasure for himself on earth, not considering the eternal ramifications of his decision. The remainder of his earthly life might be enviable, but how about his life throughout eternity? He possessed earthly treasures, but what about heavenly treasures?

Third, he never considered God in his circumstances. It never occurred to him that God, the one responsible for the good weather that brought abundant crops, had blessed him in order to make him a blessing to others. He never saw his opportunity to glorify God by obeying Him and loving his neighbor as himself. Although he was rich in earthly material things, he was not "rich toward God" (Luke 12:21) as Jesus said. His lifestyle was a testimony to his unbelief, as he ignored the two greatest commandments. He could have labored for many more years under God's blessing, working to show his love to God and others by sharing his abundance.

And fourth, he assumed he had "many years to come" (Luke 12:19), something that no greedy person should assume, as God certainly has no vested interest in keeping greedy people alive. The rich man in Jesus' parable died on the very night he made his selfish decision. The final decision of his life was a selfish, damning decision. His death that night may well have been God's judgment upon him because of his selfish decision. Jesus certainly didn't leave us much room to think that the rich fool went to heaven that night.<sup>3</sup> In a moment of time, he lost everything he lived for. One second, he owned an abundance, and the next second he owned nothing. God asked him, "And now who will own what you have prepared?" (Luke 12:20). It wouldn't be him.

Clearly, Jesus described for us a greedy man, as that was the topic that the parable was meant to illustrate. Note that Jesus didn't describe a rich man whose actions would have been approved by God if he had only adjusted his *attitude* about what he possessed, still keeping it all and retiring. *Greed is an attitude that is always manifested by actions.* If one repents of greed, he must not only change his attitude, he must also change his actions. *If he doesn't change his actions, he has not changed his attitude.*

Note also that this rich man was guilty before God, not because he desired what wasn't his, but because he decided to keep what God had given him and wanted him to share with others. *He was selfish in the use of his money and possessions.* He, as Jesus plainly said of him, laid "up treasure for himself" (Luke 12:21). He was greedy. All who lay up treasure for themselves are greedy. Such people are "not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21), just as Jesus said. God thinks they are fools.

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<sup>3</sup> I suspect that some will object, saying that Jesus never said that the man went to hell. But are we to believe that this man, who served as Jesus' illustration of greed in action, was saved and went to heaven, only forfeiting certain rewards there, in light of the fact that the New Testament teaches that no greedy / covetous person will inherit God's kingdom? (see 1 Cor. 6:10; Eph. 5:3-6).

## The Application

Now let us begin to pinpoint some application for our own lives from this parable of the rich fool. Let us pray that Jesus' words will have the impact upon us that He intended they would have.

How would you respond to someone who, after reading Jesus' story, said, "I'm so glad that I'm not a farmer, because if I were and I had an abundant harvest, I'd have to consider what Jesus taught"?

Surely you would point out to him that what Jesus said in this parable has application to other people besides farmers. Such a comment would be as foolish as claiming that the Parable of the Good Samaritan only applies to people journeying on the road to Jericho.

What if someone said, "I'm so glad that I've accumulated my wealth gradually rather than by a sudden windfall like that farmer in Jesus' parable. Otherwise, what Jesus said would have application to me."

Would you not realize that person was also fooling himself? What Jesus said has application to everyone who has more than he needs, anyone who might "lay up treasure for himself," whether he's accumulated it slowly or suddenly. I might also add that there is nothing in Jesus' parable that states the rich man accumulated his wealth suddenly. His wealth was more likely acquired gradually, through seasons of fruitful harvests. I suspect that it would be difficult to retire on just one year's crop.

Suppose someone said, "I'm glad I'm not faced with the option of an early retirement, or else I'd have to give some thought to what Jesus taught"?

Although what Jesus said has application to those faced with the option of an early retirement, it clearly has application to those not faced with such an option. Jesus Himself revealed to whom the parable applies—anyone who has opportunity, like the man in the parable, to "lay up treasure for himself" (Luke 12:21), something that Jesus forbade all of His followers to do (see Matt. 6:19-24; Luke 12:33). It makes no difference if we are farmers or flight attendants, if we've accumulated our wealth quickly or gradually, or if we are young or old. The rich fool in Jesus' parable is representative of anyone who has more than he needs and yields to the sin of greed.

## How We Might Be Just Like the Rich Fool

When I first began to read this parable honestly and contextually, I realized that I was in many ways similar to the rich fool. I initially assumed that my practice of tithing set me apart from him, and perhaps to some degree it did. But it occurred to me that the rich fool could have been a good Jew who faithfully tithed all of his life. And certainly it is possible to tithe and still lay up treasures for oneself if one has enough abundance. Surely it is possible to tithe and still be selfish with the remaining abundance. *One may tithe and remain guilty of greed.* The Pharisees scrupulously tithed, but according to Scripture, they were also lovers of money (see Luke 11:42; 16:14) and were also hell-bound (see Matt. 23:13-15).

Are we to think, for example, that God would have fully approved of the rich man if he had tithed on his increase and then decided to take his ease and selfishly retire at that point in his life with his remaining abundance? That doesn't seem very likely, does it? Just because a rich man tithes his income, is he fulfilling the commandments to love God with all his heart and love his neighbor as himself? Although I had tithed my income for many years, I used the remainder of my abundance to enrich my own life, just like the rich fool did. As my income increased, I just kept spending more on myself, "building bigger barns," as it were, never content.

But there are other ways that this parable applies to so many of us. Certainly we are just as foolish as the man in the parable if we think our lives consist of our

possessions—when the primary pursuit in our lives is the acquiring and selfish enjoyment of material things. But isn't that the picture of so many of us who profess to be Christians? Our lives completely revolve around acquiring, selfishly spending, and selfishly enjoying wealth. That's what we live for. We aren't seeking first the kingdom of God, as Jesus commanded us (see Matt. 6:33). We are trying to find happiness in material wealth, not in knowing, loving, enjoying and obeying God. We are rich, but not "rich toward God" (Luke 12:21), and the evidence is overwhelming.

Why, for example, do the majority of professing Christians in wealthy countries like ours have no real devotional life? Why isn't the average professing Christian involved at all in the basic things that Jesus said mark authentic believers, such as visiting the sick or providing food and clothing for poor believers (see Matt. 25:31-46)? Why do we give so little money to help fulfill the Great Commission, the large majority of us not even attaining to the Old Covenant standard of tithing? Why do we respond to charitable appeals with the line, "I'll need to pray about that," but we don't need to pray about spending discretionary income on ourselves? In short, why do so many of us who profess to be Christians show so little commitment to Christ in relation to how we spend our time and money? Why are so many of us so lukewarm?

The answer to all these questions is that we are primarily pursuing the American dream, and we are focused on enjoying the material fruits of our labor.

From our earliest years we are programmed to believe that happiness is found in "things." We're encouraged by everyone to perfect those virtues that will reap material rewards. Hard work, honesty and thrift can all really "pay off" in the future. If we work hard in school, then we can get a "good job," which means a job with a high salary.

We choose our careers based on their financial potential, and then work long hours for years and years to pay the leases on our late model cars and the mortgage on a house that speaks of our success. And who has time for something as trivial as raising children? So we drop off our babies at the day care center in servitude to the Almighty Dollar. How can we deny that money controls our lives? The obvious goal in life for so many of us is to earn more money, acquire more possessions and enjoy more pleasures, and then retire comfortably. The sooner, the better.

### **More Similarities**

But the evidence that we think our lives consist of our possessions does not end there. We collect *stuff*. More furniture, more clothing, more tools, more figurines, more golf clubs, more china. While billions wait to hear the gospel and thirty-thousand children die each day, we keep right on collecting more. Ultimately, our possessions possess us, consuming all of our God-given time and energy. There is no time to do God's will because we're slaves to our money and possessions. We've got one thousand things that must be used, enjoyed, polished, repaired, dusted, insured, stored and maintained. Don't forget to purchase the service contract that will get it back up and running if it breaks down! How can we honestly say that we are not convinced that our lives consist of the abundance of our possessions? Jesus couldn't have made it more plain—the one who "lays up treasure for himself" is not "rich toward God" (Luke 12:21). It is just that simple.

Not only must we have what advertisers say we must have, but we must have it all *now*. So we borrow to the limit, wasting a huge percentage of our wealth on interest payments, again, while millions starve and billions wait to hear that Jesus died for them. Many of our monthly payments are a continual testimony to our greed.

Then there are our many activities that all cost money—sports, hobbies, entertainment and so on, too often pursued with devotion that could only be defined as religious. Over our lifetimes we waste hundreds of thousands of dollars on things that are nothing more than pure self-indulgence. How can we claim that we are ready to



stand before Jesus while being such poor stewards of the time and money He has entrusted to us? If the essence of following Jesus is self-denial (see Matt. 16:24), then where are the people who are following Jesus? Are not our lives more characterized by self-indulgence than self-denial?

Moreover, we spend the majority of our money on things that no one *could* spend their money on a hundred years ago and on which the majority of people in the world will never spend their money. Our lives could be summarized by two words: *acquire* and *indulge*. Worse yet, we are never satisfied. We need a bigger house, a newer car, a more exotic vacation. And we don't even recognize our greed, just as insane people can't detect their insanity. Our culture of materialism has callused our consciences. The only real difference between the rich fool and many of us is that God is still giving us time to repent of our greed. The rich fool has faced His judgment—we are waiting our turn.

If your conscience is being pricked, remember, guilt is good when it is based on God's Word. Don't resist it. Embrace it. God is speaking to you.

### **Still More Similarities**

We are equally as foolish as the rich fool if we don't consider the eternal ramifications of our earthly decisions regarding money and possessions. If no greedy or covetous person is going to inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Eph. 5:5), should we not seriously consider if we are guilty in this matter? Eternity depends, at least in part, on what we do with our money. Jesus expressly forbade us to lay up treasures on earth, but commanded us to lay them up in heaven by sharing what God entrusts to us. All of us will have to stand before Him one day to give an account of our stewardship. Will He accept our excuses?

We are just as foolish as the rich fool if we don't consider that God is the source of our every material possession—if not by direct blessing, at least by His permissive will. Thus He has the absolute right to direct our use of what He entrusts to us. I might think, "I worked my way through college, and I've worked hard ever since. I've *earned* my wealth, so I *deserve* to enjoy spending it on myself." But have I considered how my life would have turned out had I been born to a cocaine addict in a New York City housing project, or to a prostitute in Calcutta? Have I considered that God allowed me to be born in the wealthy country in which I live, and that He is the one who made me as intelligent as I am, and who made it possible for me to work hard or attend college? Thus, I am just as accountable to God for my wealth as the rich fool was in Jesus' parable. If God has blessed me, it is because He intends that I share His blessing with others. What would Jesus have thought of His disciples if, upon receiving the multiplied fish and bread from His hands, they had piled up for themselves what He intended for them to share? What must He think if we indulge ourselves with that which He intends for us to use for His glory? Are we faithful stewards?

Finally, we are just as foolish as the rich fool if we assume that we have many years left in our lives, especially when we are living so selfishly. We should live every day as if it were our last one. We could be standing in front of Jesus' throne one minute from now. In fact, Jesus concluded His thoughts about greed that day by warning His disciples to be ready for His return (see Luke 12:35-48).

Unless we have a rich relationship with God, we're not ready. If all we've done with our lives is acquire more for ourselves, we're fools, because everything we've lived for will be gone in a moment. The only thing that is eternal is our relationship with God.

## A Warning to Those with Little

Jesus had still more to say on the subject of greed. He didn't want us to think that greed is a sin that is committed only by those who have abundance. I again quote His elaboration to His disciples:

For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body than clothing. Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and they have no storeroom nor barn; and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why are you anxious about other matters? Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you, O men of little faith! And do not seek what you shall eat, and what you shall drink, and do not keep worrying. For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things. But seek for His kingdom, and these things shall be added to you. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves purses which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Luke 12:22-34).

Notice that Jesus began by saying, "For this reason I say to you..." Those words tie everything He has just said to what He was about to say. The subject was still greed and the folly of those who think that life consists of their possessions. Notice also the similarity of Jesus' words here about *life being more than food* and His previous words about *life not consisting of the abundance of one's possessions*. The subject hasn't changed.

Now, however, Jesus applies what He has just said to those who, by normal American standards, have very little. It is possible for them to be just as deceived as the rich if they are primarily focused on earthly possessions, even if those possessions are basic necessities such as food and clothing. Just because a person has few possessions, he is not automatically more devoted to God or less of a servant of mammon. Anyone, rich or poor, who thinks that life consists of possessions, is making a grave mistake.

Jesus does not want His disciples to be preoccupied with even the necessities of life, because God will take care of those things. Certainly, if God doesn't want us to be preoccupied with life's basic necessities, how much more does He not want us to be preoccupied with non-essentials?

### Needs and Wants

I used to question where to draw the line between my needs and my wants. In the just-quoted passage about food and covering, however, Jesus made it very clear. He said, "Your Father knows that *you need these things*" (Luke 12:30; emphasis added). Those things are all we actually need. Everything besides food and covering is a want.<sup>4</sup> That is why Paul wrote,

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<sup>4</sup> The concept that our real needs consist of only food and covering is found in numerous other scriptures. See, for example, Gen. 28:20; Prov. 25:2; Luke 3:11; 12:22-30.

For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction (1 Tim. 6:7-9).

Can we honestly claim that we would be content if all we had was food and covering (clothing and shelter) when we are obviously not content with the abundance we now possess, but are continually striving to acquire and selfishly enjoy more and more?

Can we say we are convinced, like Paul, that the desire to be rich (which Paul seems to define as desiring more than food and covering) is potentially damning because of the many temptations to be selfish and greedy that confront those with such a desire?<sup>5</sup>

All of Christ's followers are supposed to be seeking for His kingdom, just as He said (see Luke 12:31). His kingdom is the only thing that is eternal, which is precisely why Jesus instructed all of His disciples (as we just read) not to lay up treasures on the earth. All of our earthly possessions are destined to perish; in fact, most are perishing before our eyes right now. Thus it makes perfect sense to sell our possessions and lay up eternal treasure in heaven as Christ commanded.

As martyred missionary Jim Elliot said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." But how many Christians do you know who have obeyed Christ's clear command (that we just read) to sell their possessions and give to charity, as did all the first Christians? (see Acts 2:45; 4:34-35). Most of us seem to be gathering more possessions.

Jesus couldn't have made His point more clear. He does not want our hearts to be fastened to this world. Rather, He wants our hearts to be in heaven (see Luke 12:34). When our lives revolve around temporal gain and selfish pursuits, can we honestly say that our hearts are not on the earth? Can we honestly say our hearts are in heaven, and that what we do with our money and possessions reflects that heavenly affection? *Or are we rich fools?*

I warned you that this wasn't going to be easy! If you've been convicted, embrace it. Confession and repentance will be the result. When I was first convicted, I was so full of pride that it was very difficult for me to admit my sin. But I just couldn't ignore what Jesus taught, and as I would humble myself just a little, confessing my sin, God poured out more of His grace and opened more of His Word to me. Remember that He resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

If you find yourself resenting what I've written so far, it's time to get back on your knees. Pray fervently for God's help and grace, admitting your desperate need for both. Then go back and reread this chapter. Believe me, you aren't ready for the next chapter until you can face up to this one. You may still have some questions or objections, but I assure you that we'll cover them in following chapters.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;  
And see if there be any hurtful way in me,  
And lead me in the everlasting way (Ps. 139:23-24).

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<sup>5</sup> The *King James Version* does not soften Paul's warning here as much as the NASB seems to: "But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition" (emphasis added).