

**Luke 12:13 ff.  
August 4, 2019  
Being Rich Toward God**

In our Gospel reading from St. Luke today, Jesus refuses to act as judge in a family dispute over an inheritance.

Instead, he tells a parable about a man who amasses enough wealth to retire only to die on the very night of his retirement.

The purpose of the parable is not to condemn the wealthy or even the idle rich. Nor is the man featured in the story punished because of his foolish expectations.

The parable is about the futility of putting our faith in anything other than God. Do not, said Jesus, put your hopes and your faith in anything that is temporary and passing. Jesus singled out wealth and the good life because those two things are so universally desired, not to say worshipped.

For me, the key words of the text are these: “One’s life does not consist of the abundance of possessions.” And, “So it is with those who store treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

There is that old expression, “You can’t take it with you” to which Jack Benny used to answer, “If I can’t take it with me, then I’m not going.” And that made people laugh because we know how much we would like to take our priorities into the kingdom of God.

Wanting to take it all with us is a human failing just as wide-spread in Jesus’ day as it is in ours. That is why Jesus talked so much about money and possessions. Someone has calculated that one out of every ten verses of the Gospels is on the subject of money.

We are to be rich toward God. I have thought of three ways in which we are to live by those words.

I. First of all, we are to be rich toward God in thanksgiving. Certainly, that would include thanksgiving for the abundant life that we have enjoyed. And here we have to be on our guard because all too easily we can allow our blessings to insulate and isolate us so that we can no longer appreciate how very blessed we are by comparison to most of the rest of the world.

I am reminded of a story about a little girl, a student in an exclusive school in Beverly Hills, California, a school for the children of movie stars and movie producers and executives and so on. Her class was asked to write a composition about poverty. This was the introduction to her paper:

“Once upon a time, there was a poor little girl. Her father was poor and her mother was poor and her governess was poor and the butler was poor and the chauffer was poor. In fact, everybody in that house was very very poor.”

Part of being rich toward God in thanksgiving is to remember that we are the favored few.

Then we are to be rich toward God in thanksgiving for what God has done for us *exclusive* of material blessings.

In recent years the word *Eucharist* has become one of the most common names for our Holy Communion. It is a word that I had not heard until I studied Greek at my seminary. Eucharist is from the Greek word for *thanksgiving*.

It is a good word to use because our central service is in thanksgiving for the gift of God’s kingdom through his Christ. That is *the* cause for being rich in thanksgiving toward God. God has reached down to this small speck in his universe to give us meaning and purpose. We have been brought for death to life, from darkness to light and from despair to hope; and we gather here on Sunday mornings to remember and celebrate that.

And then we are to be rich toward God in thanksgiving for *every* gift, however small. In his Epistle, St. James tells us “All good giving, every perfect gift, comes from above, from the father of lights in heaven.”

In a booklet published some years ago, retired Bishop Richard Emerich wrote, “Charles Lamb, the English essayist of the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, said that, in addition to saying a grace of thanksgiving before he ate, he was disposed to say grace before, or after, twenty other things: before going on a pleasant walk, before meeting with friends, after a problem had been solved, before reading Shakespeare (and so on).”

Then Bishop Emerich added: “So it should be with golf, for St. Paul said we are to give thanks in all things.” And then he went on to talk about the game of golf and how it relates to religion.

I agree with Charles Lamb and Bishop Emerich. God is not just the God of religion and spirituality. He is the God of the universe and all of life and there are many things in life that are healthy and pleasurable, beautiful and uplifting, noble and excellent, and fun that we *should* say grace over.

II. Secondly, we are to be rich toward God by helping to answer the prayers we pray.

In the Gospel lesson from St. Luke, appointed for last week, Jesus teaches the disciples to pray. He teaches them what we call *The Lord’s Prayer* and then he tells them a parable about persistence. He

tells them that God would no more refuse them than they would refuse their own child and that he always gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is God's primary answer to prayer.

In the Gospels, one of the names that Jesus gives the Holy Spirit is *paracletos* (in our English Bibles it's *paraclete*) and that name/job-description helps us understand what the Spirit does for those who ask.

Someone has explained it like this, with a comparison: "The Speaker of the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. has a parliamentary assistant who stands by constantly. He anticipates the business before the house, the decisions to be made, the parliamentary procedure to be followed. He is ever ready to give counsel and direction when needed. He is the 'Paraclete,' the one who stands by."

The Holy Spirit stands by as we pray to give us counsel and direction; and the Holy Spirit then gives us empowerment to answer the prayers we pray.

Norman Pittenger, the noted writer and preacher, said this about the empowerment part:

"Where then does the Holy Spirit begin? The answer is that the work begins in our human lives where we are brought to *respond*..."

The Holy Spirit will counsel and direct us as we pray and then will empower us when we begin to act. Don't ever count on being a Christian couch potato. We do not let go to let God. The Spirit helps and we do the work.

III. And, finally, we are to be rich toward God in what we honor and esteem - in others and in ourselves.

A man named Philip Slater wrote this in an article called "Wealth Addiction":

"Pushing old patterns to an extreme is one way to describe the rush of 'success' books that have flooded the market in the past few years. "These books purport to show how to make a million dollars on or off the stock market (almost never what to do with the money when you get it). In almost all of these books, money is the ultimate value against which everything else is measured. Rarely, if ever, is it put in the larger context of what people want out of life and what kind of society they want to live in."

I remember the banquet given for Harold Gosnell when he retired as Bishop of the Diocese of West Texas and how one person after another heaped praise on him in terms of dollars and cents and

called attention to how much he would have been paid as the C.E.O. some corporation or other, had he not chosen the ministry as his vocation.

The meant well, but we should, in our appreciation of the things that really matter about people, let them remain priceless.

Harry Emerson Fosdick left us this thought: “When through experience of sin or sorrow or through hard practical struggle, we come to the *real* maturity, we always tend to grow out of crying to God, ‘give me...’ and into the deepest prayer, beginning with ‘make me...’ In a word, we cease valuing God merely because of the things he may give, and we come into the love of God himself and a desire to be made over by him.”

It is being rich toward God that matters: in thanksgiving; and in how we answer our prayers; and in what we honor and esteem. When that kind of wealth is foremost for us, then we can claim the kingdom that God gives us through Jesus as our own.