

## Commentary on Luke 12:13-59

### **Luke 12: 13-21      Coveting**

We pick up in our passage with Jesus continuing His “come to Jesus” talk with the crowds, His followers and His disciples. A man from the crowd yells out to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” It was customary for a dispute like this to be taken to a rabbi to settle. Given the request, this is likely the younger brother since the first born traditionally received a double portion of the inheritance. But, Jesus responds to him by saying, “Who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” Jesus’ answer shows this man not only does not get who Jesus is, but his response also gives us a picture of the man’s own heart. Jesus immediately turns to “them” and tells a parable. It is not clear who the “them” is here, but given that this was a such a large crowd (see 12:1), it is likely the “them” refers to a smaller group of His followers (see also 12:22).

The first thing Jesus says gives them and us a warning against covetousness, saying, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” He follows that statement with a parable about the rich fool who amasses wealth and builds new barns and then sits back to eat, drink and be merry only to have his life taken from him. This man’s purpose was all about attaining wealth and comfort. The point Jesus is making here is that all the work and saving for his own good only resulted in a wasteful life given that he lays up treasure for himself and was not generous toward God.

Covetousness (or greed as we find in the NIV translation) comes from the Greek word *pleonexia* which means a greedy desire to have more; greed or avarice. We find our first command against covetousness in the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment in Exodus 20:17 - “*You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.*” The Hebrew word here, *hamad*, underscores the side of coveting with regard to desire. Fascinating, isn’t it, that the sinful human heart’s propensity for desiring things of others is an age old problem! “Few sayings of Jesus (12:15) are more relevant to the consumer mentality of the modern world than this statement, for life cannot be measured or judged by the amount of stuff we own, amass or win.”<sup>1</sup> The world so readily lauds honor and praise on those who have collected a fortune (why else would Forbes magazine publish a list of the Richest People in the World aka “the Icons of Excellence”?). Jesus’ teaching here does not call out wealth as the particular, specific evil but rather it is the heart of the man who felt he had no need for God nor acknowledgement of God’s blessing upon him that is the evil. Augustine speaks of the man’s folly when he wrote, “He did not realize that the bellies of the poor are much safer storerooms than his barns.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Luke 12:22-12:34      Don’t be anxious!**

In verse 22, Jesus turns to address His disciples to elaborate more on His teaching about *life*. He begins by transitioning with a “therefore” and continues with “I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on.” The Greek word for life

<sup>1</sup> Edwards, James, “The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Luke.” Eerdmans Press, 2015, p. 370.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, 372.

here is *psyche* denoting the soul or the “qualitative life i.e. the values and relationships that constitute personhood.”<sup>3</sup> Adding the word “body” to the statement ensures that Jesus is referring to the totality of one’s personhood – body and soul. He reminds us here that as His followers, we have nothing to worry about – nothing to be anxious about. But, that isn’t always so easy, right? So what does Jesus mean when He says, “Don’t be anxious”?

The Greek word for anxious is *merimnao* which means to be anxious, to be troubled with cares, to seek to promote one’s interest. We’ve encountered this word before in Luke’s Gospel. It is the same word Jesus uses when addressing Martha in 10:41 saying “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things...” and again in 12:11 when Jesus reminds the disciples to not be anxious when they are confronted with having to defend themselves in the synagogues and in front of the rulers and authorities. Paul also uses this same word in Philippians 4:6 when he writes, “Do not be anxious about anything...” In all of these instances, Jesus is teaching us that we are not to have a self-centered, counterproductive worry that distracts us from living out a Gospel-centered and Gospel-focused life.<sup>4</sup> And how well He knows us that He continues to teach us and remind us of this truth!

The ESV Study Bible notes that Jesus gives three reasons why we are not to be anxious. First, is found in 12:23 when it’s stated that life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Our worth is not wrapped up in physical things but rather the spiritual things of Jesus that are so much more valuable. Second, Jesus uses the image of the raven in 12:24 and what little cares the birds have and how God feeds even them. As this is so, how much more value are we than the birds! Third, in 12:25, we are reminded of the futility of anxiety and worry. Anxiety does not lead to the addition of one single hour of our lives as we have very little control over our own lives.

The next set of verses direct us to consider the images of the lilies of the field and the simplicity of grass and how in their beauty and glory, God designed them and cares for them. We are then reminded to not worry about what we are to eat or drink for it is the world that chases after those things. Notice the contrast of Jesus’ words here with the parabolic image of the rich fool in 12:19 – we are not to worry about what we eat or drink or wear, yet it was the rich fool who saved up enough and then turned his life to only these things – to eat, drink and be merry. Our life’s goal, Jesus teaches, is to seek His kingdom. “God’s kingdom, his glory, and his reign in the world are to be the defining purpose of Jesus’ disciples. When disciples make God’s way in this world their primary goal, all other things – the food, clothing, shelter that the world clamors for – will be given to them as well.”<sup>5</sup>

The concluding verses of this section seem to voice a softer tone from Jesus as He encourages the disciples not to fear and calls them a “little flock.” He continues by stating “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” How amazing is that!? Again, we see Jesus giving away His kingdom to those who seek and follow Him. He ends this teaching with the tough three-fold command to 1) sell your possessions; 2) give to the needy; and 3) provide yourselves with money

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, 370.

<sup>4</sup> NIV Study Bible note on Philippians 4:6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, 376.

bags that don't grow old. Jesus' teaching reminds us that we are to not let our possessions consume us but rather to be free from the burden of them to care and love and take care of God's kingdom and of others. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," simplifies and sums up well Jesus' point here.

**Luke 12:35-47      Get Ready!**

So Jesus turns from the stress reducing and relaxing teaching of "Don't be anxious..." to a teaching and tone of urgency and readiness. "Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning," Jesus instructs His disciples. His tone perhaps hearkens back to the days of the Passover, when the Israelites were instructed to prepare and eat the feast in haste with their belts fastened, their sandals on their feet, and their staff in hand (Ex 12:11). "Stay dressed for action" literally means "let your loins stay girded" which invokes an image of a man prepared to run with his robe tucked into his belt.<sup>6</sup> Jesus gives His disciples instruction on the posture they are to have that is "characterized in terms of 'waiting' (12:36), 'watching' (12:37), 'opening the door' (12:36); 'readiness' (12:40), and being 'blessed' (12:38)."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus elaborates on this call to readiness by using the illustration of servants guarding the home of their master who they are waiting to return from a wedding a feast. Weddings were joyful celebrations in Jewish life and yet Jesus uses this imagery to focus on the servants not the guests of honor.<sup>8</sup> He again turns the image upside-down as He describes what the master of the house does upon His return. Upon returning and finding the servants awake, the master dresses himself for service and invites the servants to come and recline at the table (in a posture of celebrating a banquet or feast). The master comes and serves them. This image gives a picture of the end-time messianic feast which is mentioned later in Luke 13:29; 14:15-24; 22:27-30 and Rev. 19:9. Jesus reiterates the need for readiness by noting that it is unknown if the master will come during the second or third watches of the night. His emphasis continues with a parable in the parable of the thief who breaks into the master's house. Had the master known the time of day the thief would break in, he would not have let his house be robbed. Jesus concludes by stressing the importance of being ready. The Son of Man will come at an hour we do not expect.

Peter interrupts and asks a clarifying question – "Lord is this parable us or for everybody?" Jesus responds to his question by continuing with His teaching in another parable. The focus shifts to the two choices the household manager/servant can make. First, Jesus draws a picture of a faithful and wise household manager who stewards well the affairs and property of his master. He receives the reward of being set over all the master's possessions. Second, however, is the servant who sees the delay in the master's return as an opportunity to usurp the privileges given him by abusing the other servants and eating and drinking and getting drunk (again, a picture similar to the rich fool in 12:19). The reaction of the master to this choice is admittedly both violent and grim. The master will return unexpectedly and will punish the servant by cutting him to pieces

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<sup>6</sup> ESV Study Bible note on 12:35.

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, 378.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, 379.

and putting him with the unfaithful. Jesus' description here of the two choices draws a picture of both the reward and benefit of faithful stewardship and discipleship and the impending judgement and consequence of disobedience and rebellion. The concluding verses of this section teach and remind us that those who have been given much by God will be held to a higher standard on the last day.

### **Luke 12:49-59      Division and conflict**

The difficult teaching and tone of the final section of verses continues. These are harsh words, images and teachings, but they reveal to us more and more the nature and character of our Savior. Jesus begins in verse 49 by invoking two images to reiterate His teaching on His mission and purpose – fire and baptism. The image of fire points to a sense of purging or the defining division between believers and unbelievers. The invocation of baptism points to Jesus' impending suffering and death. "The use of 'baptism' as a metaphor of Jesus' impending death is evidence that He foresaw both his death in Jerusalem and its atoning significance. The death of Jesus in Jerusalem is a precondition of the coming fire, and like 'fire,' 'baptism' inaugurates the fulfillment of God's will."<sup>9</sup> But then Jesus states that He did not come to give peace on earth but rather division. What!? Jesus, I thought you were the Prince of Peace! Jesus goes on to explain that even families will be divided because of Him. Again, what!? "Division may seem discordant and even offensive to our inclusive age, but it is a fundamental property of God's relation to the world."<sup>10</sup> The division Jesus invokes is a gracious way of protection and provision for His followers and the gift and grace of His teaching here ensures that we know the privilege and consequences of our choice to seek and follow him or not. It is a matter of eternal life or death.

In verse 54, Jesus turns again to the crowd and gives them another warning about whether or not they follow Him and are a part of His kingdom-building work. He uses meteorological signs that the people would've known as a way to point to their spiritual blindness and emptiness. A cloud rising in the west would've pointed to a shower coming from the Mediterranean Sea bringing moist air. A south wind blowing would bring scorching heat pointing to the hot air rising from desert terrain. Jesus once again calls them hypocrites because they are able to interrupt the weather conditions, but not see the spiritual realities the Messiah present among them invokes.

The final verses of this section point to a seemingly practical question – "why do you not judge for yourselves what is right," Jesus asks. The ESV Study Bible note states the obvious teaching here – "It is better to settle with one's accuser before the dispute is brought before a judge." But perhaps Jesus is asking the obvious question given the verses right before? "If you know how to judge rightly in such a situation, then judge equally rightly in 'interpreting the present time.' The present time refers to the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in the person and ministry of Jesus."<sup>11</sup> "Like the debtor and his opponent en route to the magistrate, this is the time for Israel to settle

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<sup>9</sup> Edwards, 384.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards, 386.

<sup>11</sup> Edwards, 388.

accounts with God. Let them recognize the season, let them wake up to common sense and 'be reconciled' to their God."<sup>12</sup>

### **Jesus' Upside-Down Kingdom**

What do these passages teach us about Jesus and His Upside-down Kingdom?

- 1) In Jesus' Upside-down Kingdom, the first will be last and the last will be first (and we'll see more of this next week!). Those who the world says are the most successful, powerful, wealthy who possess an insatiable desire for more and fail to possess a sense of Godly generosity and stewardship will not experience the best of life offered through Jesus and His kingdom.
- 2) King Jesus provides for every need we may ever have. And so why do we worry, why are anxious and why do we try and control? King Jesus is the one in control with all the power and He rules with love and grace and truth and blessing.
- 3) In Jesus' Upside-down Kingdom, we are called to live with a sense of urgency and readiness and preparedness. And when He returns, He will call His people to Himself. Rather than His servants serving the King, the King has prepared the banquet and set the table and will serve them. Can you even imagine!?
- 4) In Jesus' Upside-down Kingdom, He invokes conflict and division to fulfill His purposes and mission. He will separate the wheat from the chaff, the believers from the unbelievers, the good from the evil. It is a gift and blessing that He teaches us about this and gives us the knowledge and heart of His Word.

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<sup>12</sup> Edwards, 389.

**Discussion Questions for Luke 13:1-21**

**Luke 13:1-5          Repent or Perish**

Observations:

1) Who were the Galileans?

2) Who was Pilate?

3) What is the tower in Siloam?

Interpretation:

4) What does it mean to repent?

5) What are the consequences for not repenting?

Application:

6) Describe ways in which we have a tendency to categorize our sins (i.e. that there are some sins that are committed that are worse than others.). How do these verses affect your thinking on sin and the need to repent?

7) Ponder a time or season when you have undergone a period of repentance. How did this transform your life with Christ?

**Luke 13:6-9          The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree**

Observations:

8) Who are the characters in this parable?

9) What did the vinedresser ask the man to do?

Interpretation:

10) Who or what does the fig tree represent?

11) Who does the vinedresser represent? Why did he want to cut the fig tree down?

12) Who does the man represent? Why did he want to keep trying for the fig tree to bear fruit?

Application:

13) Describe a time when you felt you've been given a second chance from the Lord. How did that transform you and your heart and your walk with Jesus?

**Luke 13:10-17      The Woman with a Disabling Spirit**

Observations

14) List the different characters in these verses. What were each of them doing?

15) How did the people respond to Jesus (v.17)?

Interpretation

16) Compare and contrast these verses to Luke 11:37-44. What is similar and what is different?

17) What's more important: healing the disabled woman or keeping the rites and rituals about the Sabbath? Why?

Application

18) Have you ever felt like the woman Jesus healed or known someone who experienced a healing like this? What do you think it felt like for her to be defended by Jesus in front of the synagogue ruler? What does this teach you about Jesus?

19) When have you witnessed hypocrisy in the church? In what ways is God inviting you to be more authentic as a part of His church and as an individual believer?

**Luke 13:18-21      The Mustard Seed and the Leaven**

Observations:

20) What is the mustard seed and what happens to it?

21) What is leaven and what happens to it?

Interpretation:

22) What is the kingdom of God like?

23) Why does Jesus use these two images to describe the kingdom of God? What is He teaching us here?

Application:

24) In what ways do these simple verses encourage you as you seek to participate in God's kingdom-building work?

25) When have you seen something seemingly very small or insignificant have a huge impact in God's kingdom?