

Luke 12: Being Rich Toward God

Luke chapter 12 and verse 15 commences a new section in the chapter, with various parables of Messiah being recorded. Each of these parables were to illustrate the principle taught by the Master that those who would follow him ought to:

“Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15).

The first illustration was the parable of a foolish rich man, who laid up worldly good for himself. Here, we find that “the ground of a rich man brought forth plentifully” (Lu. 12:16), and he used his wealth for his own purposes. He trusted in his riches, as security for the future: “I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry” (Lu. 12:19). But that night he died, and lost everything that he had accrued. So the parable ends with the warning:

“So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, **and is not rich toward God**” (Luk. 12:21)

Under the Law of Moses, it was required for men to use the blessings Yahweh had given in His Service, acknowledging Him as Provider. The spirit is epitomised in the Proverbs:

“**Honour Yahweh with thy substance**, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.” (Prov. 3:9-10).

The Fool in Messiah’s parable did not do this: though his barns were filled with plenty, he failed to “honour Yahweh” with his “substance”.

We read in the parable that because his barns weren’t big enough to accommodate his increase of goods, the fool’s solution was to built bigger storehouses for it all. He gave no thought to the needs of the poor, or how he could help others with his wealth: his only concern was for self gain and personal comfort. He seems to be enacting the spirit of Psalm 39, where the David muses the short span of human life:

“Yahweh make me to know **mine end**, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am. Behold, thou hast made my day as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah. Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain; he **heapeth up riches**, and knoweth not who shall gather them” (Psa. 39:4-6).

David reflected upon the frailty of human nature, and the vanity of heaping up riches that will be lost through death. But David did not trust in his riches – he continues: “And now Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in thee ...” (Psa. 39:7). Here is the true spirit of faith: he did not set his heart upon the riches of this life, but looked to Yahweh for a steadfast Hope.

In Luke chapter 18, we read of another man who was increased with riches. He asked the Master “what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” and declared that he had kept the commandments of Moses from his youth up. But the record continues: “Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me” (Lu. 18:22). This was what the fool in Messiah’s parable should have done: sell his surplus goods, and give to the poor. The certain ruler that spoke to the Lord

went away sorrowing, for he was a wealthy man: “when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich”.

The Master’s response illustrates the added difficulty that those who are rich have, in entering the Kingdom:

“When Jesus saw that he was very sorrowful, he said, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. And they that heard it said, Who then can be saved? And he said, The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.” (Lu. 18:24-27).

Notice, it is difficult for the rich to enter into the kingdom, but it is not impossible with God. There is nothing wrong with being rich – indeed, Abraham was a rich man – but it is essential not to trust in those riches, but in Yahweh who provides them all. There is a good example of this in the case of Job – he was a rich man, yet he trusted in Yahweh, and not those riches. By contrast to the fool in Messiah’s parable, he considered his latter end:

“Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: Yahweh gave, and Yahweh hath taken away; blessed by the name of Yahweh.”

And the divine commentary upon this exclamation was:

“In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly” (Job. 1:21-22).

The example is there for our learning: we must use whatever riches we might have in this life, to glorify Yahweh. We must not trust in them in themselves, but in our Heavenly Father who gives all.

LAYING UP TREASURE

The condemnation of the fool in Messiah’s parable was that he laid up “treasure **for himself**”, and was “not rich toward God.” This man, although being a fictitious character in the parable, epitomised the spirit of natural Israel. Hosea describes how that “he bringeth forth fruit **unto himself**” (Hos. 10:1). Self interest and self benefit are the hallmark characteristics of the natural man. The counsel of Jesus, however, is very different:

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mat. 6:19-21).

Being risen with Christ, our lives are hid with him, and the promise is that “when Christ, who is our life shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:3-4). Treasures upon earth are uncertain, they can be taken by thieves, or corrupt according to natural means. But treasure in heaven is guaranteed to be given to the brethren of Christ when he comes again. No man can take that treasure away from us, for “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

Continuing this theme, the Apostle commanded Timothy:

“Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

Rather than laying up worldly goods in bigger barns, those who are rich in this life ought to be rather “rich in good works”, ready to “distribute” their wealth to those who are in need. By doing this, they are rich towards God, and they will lay hold on Eternal Life at the appointed time.

It is common in this life to regard men and women as being “successful” based upon the type of car they drive, or the type of house they live in, or the kind of clothes they wear. Those who are poor have not made a “success” of this life and are esteemed less favourably as a result. But as the Epistle of Christ to the ecclesia at Laodicea demonstrates, this is a fallacy. These believers were rich in the things of this life, yet lukewarm to the things of the Truth:

“Because ***thou sayest, I am rich***, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire ...” (Rev. 3:17-18).

James likewise rebuked those who trusted in their wealth in term reminiscent of Jesus (above):

“Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you ...” (Jas. 5:1-3).

Following on from the parable in question, our Lord describes how that we ought not to be anxious about obtaining this world’s goods:

“He said unto his disciples, Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on.” (Lu. 12:22).

And again:

“... seek not what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Lu. 12:29-31).

Whilst the world at large is preoccupied with the things of this life, the main concern of the disciples of Christ is to seek first the things pertaining to the kingdom. They trust that Yahweh will provide whatever else is needed to sustain a mortal existence, with those things being “added” unto them. There is more to life than food and clothing, as we saw earlier: “a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Lu. 12:15).

So far we have considered the situation of the rich, and the danger of trusting in those riches. But in the context of being “rich toward God”, even the poor can do this. Luke chapter 21 recounts the way in which an impoverished widow gave in proportion more than those who had plenty:

“he looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And he said, Of a truth I say unto you,

that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: For all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had." (Lu. 21:1-4).

This widow woman was rich towards God, despite the extent of her poverty. It is possible to be rich, yet poor:

"hearken my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen ***the poor of this world rich in faith***, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?" (Jas. 2:5).

Again, by contrast to the Laodiceans who supposed that gain is godliness, the Lord wrote to the ecclesia at Smyrna: "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty (but thou art rich)" (Rev. 2:9). They were physically dwelling in poverty, yet they were rich towards God. They were "rich in faith" and looked beyond the present time of distress and perplexity, to the future age when they will be given the riches of the Kingdom.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The narrative continues in Luke 12 to describe the words of our Master:

"Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom".

Then follows the words we considered earlier from the Matthew account:

"Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also ..." (Lu. 12:32-34).

This is something that ought to give us much comfort and encouragement. Our mortal lives are nothing more than a period of preparation for the Kingdom. Provided we maintain our faith in the power of Yahweh to save and provide, we will be granted an abundant entry into the kingdom: it is our Father's "good pleasure" to give us the Kingdom, and so we ought not fear or be afraid. Whatever might befall us in this life, our lives are hid in Christ who dwells in the heavens, and when he comes again, he will raise us up to inherit the glory and riches of the kingdom with him. Let us therefore "labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed" (Jno. 6:27).

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