

Sermon 3 August 2025 The Rich Fool

Acts 20:32-35 Luke 12:13-21

Our Gospel passage begins with a request being made of Jesus to settle a dispute between two brothers with regards their father's estate. It was not uncommon for people in Palestine to take their disputes to respected rabbis but Jesus refused to get involved. However, he does take the opportunity to make a point about what our attitude to material things should be. To put it quite simply, the accumulation of wealth will not make us happy, but rather a relationship with God does: *'Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.'* Luke 12:21. And in this context, that relationship with God will ensure our place with him in the afterlife, and the way to that relationship is what we do for others, again, in this context, being generous. In other words, sharing our wealth with others. It's called giving!

It is a theme Jesus spells out on more than one occasion. A little further on in Luke's gospel, Jesus is asked by a rich man what he must do to get eternal life. Jesus tells him that he must sell all he has and give the money to the poor. *'Sell your possessions and give to those in need. This will store up treasure for you in heaven.'* Luke 12:33. The man is naturally somewhat downcast at the thought of doing this. Jesus then says, *'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'* Luke 18:25.

I want to make a couple of points here. Firstly, God's Kingdom is, on the one hand, the afterlife. So, by being generous we are, in a sense, booking a place with God in the afterlife. But God's Kingdom can also refer to a situation here on earth, a state of affairs where we are looking after one another, caring for those in need; where everyone is putting into practice Jesus' commandment 'to love one another.' We have on occasions referred to our mission as a church being to create a slice of God's kingdom here in Flat Bush; a community where one feels nurtured, valued and cared for.

This leads me on to the second point – when we put this into practice, when we give, we feel good about ourselves, we feel happy. That is actually part and parcel of being part of God's Kingdom. About 15 years ago a study by a Harvard Business School professor found that giving money to someone else lifted happiness more than spending it on ourselves.

A similar study at about the same time carried out by the Berkely National Institute of Health found that when people give to charity, it activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure, social connection and trust, creating a warm glow effect. In our first reading, Jesus says, *'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* Acts 20:35.

In the end, what makes us happy? There are various things that can contribute – job satisfaction, playing a particular sport, music, gardening, participating in the arts etc. But ultimately, it will be people. Of that, I have no doubt. The good Lord has made us to be dependent on one another, both in a physical way and also emotionally. We feed off each other, we need each other. George Bernard Shaw said, *'We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.'*

God has made us in such a way that we are sustained, nourished, healed, nurtured and encouraged through interaction with one another. If you want to bring it all together in one word, I couldn't think of a better word than *love*. This is the essence of love as promoted and espoused by Christ. We have a moral responsibility to ourselves and to one another to reach out in affection, in regard, in love. Jesus understood so very well that this is how we nourish and sustain, not just one another, but equally important, ourselves.

A well-known psychiatrist tells the story of how a beautiful and well-dressed woman came to see him. She complained that she felt her whole life to be empty, it had no meaning. The psychiatrist went to the door and called in an elderly lady who was responsible for cleaning the offices in the building. He said to the wealthy woman, 'I'm going to ask Mary here to tell you how she found happiness. Please listen.'

The elderly lady put down her broom and told her story. 'Well, my husband died of malaria and three months later my only son was killed in a car accident. I was bereft. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. I never smiled at anyone. I even contemplated suicide. Then one evening, a little kitten followed me home. Somehow, I felt sorry for that kitten. I got it some milk, which it drank up. Then it purred and

rubbed itself against my leg. For the first time in many months, I found myself smiling. Then I stopped to think: if helping a little kitten could make me smile, maybe doing something to help other people could make me happy. So, the next day I baked some biscuits and took them to a neighbour who was sick. Every day I tried to do something nice for someone. It made me happy to see them happy. Today I don't know anyone who sleeps and eats better than I do. I've found happiness by giving it to others.'

I repeat what I said a few weeks ago, our happiness and fulfilment comes not from what we do for ourselves but what we do for others. Theologian, Royden Derrick, said, *'Happiness is a byproduct of helping others. No man ever finds happiness by thinking of himself.'*

I want to conclude by bringing this helping of others back into the context of our gospel reading, the focus of which is on wealth, and I want to draw our attention to two points Jesus makes. The first is highlighted when he says, *'You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?'* Luke 12:20. There is an ancient African practice of removing clothes from their dead before burying them. One of the purposes of this practice is to show that we leave this world the same way we came into it.

Paul makes this point in 1 Timothy 6:7: *'We brought nothing into this world, just as we shall not be able to take anything out of it.'* Jesus is making this point in this story. He tells us that what counts when we die is not the wealth we acquire during life, but the person we become in the process of living. Moliere, the great French writer, wrote, *'A man's true wealth hereafter is the good that he does in this world to his fellows.'*

Finally, the underlining message running through this story is that it is not the money or possessions themselves that bring us happiness, it is in the sharing of them that brings the happiness. *'The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.'* Proverbs 11:25. Anne Frank said, *'No one has ever become poor by giving.'*

Let me finish with another parable, though this one is not recounted by Jesus. A wise woman who was travelling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day, she met a traveller who was hungry, and the woman opened her bag to share some food with him. The hungry traveller saw the precious stone and asked the woman if she would give it to him. She did so without hesitation.

The traveller left rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth a lot. But few days later he came back to the woman. 'I've been thinking,' he said. 'I know how valuable this stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious. Please give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me this stone.'

I have never seen an unhappy generous person.