

What is Rich? What's Rich Toward God?

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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Reading this teaching of Jesus is not comforting and makes me feel guilty. Jesus speaks of the man who accumulated more and more by saying, "You fool" (Luke 12:20). But I got the message in my family of origin and the society in which I grew up that bigger barns were better barns, more crops, grain and goods were preferable. My early formation and the teaching of Jesus are in conflict. Don't you feel that way?

I have a distinct memory from my youth, probably around grade 7 or 8. All the boys were at that time beginning to wear jeans, and I wanted a pair of jeans, too. My mother thought that was OK, so we got a pair of jeans for me. I believe that I have shared in previous sermons that my father was a carpenter on the railroad. He always wore bib overalls to work. Bib overalls and jeans were made of the same material. When my father saw me wearing jeans for the first time, he reacted, and I can quote you to this day his words which were, "I have to wear these (speaking of his bib overalls) every day, and I don't want my son wearing pants like these." Implied in that statement was his aspiration for me that I would do something different with my life than working on the railroad, not that that was bad, but he hoped for something different for me. He was a person of few words, but on that occasion he made his feeling quite clear.

I was molded into the frame of thought that pushed me to think the way the man in the text today thought. Aspire for more – not to become better than anyone else but to do more than my father was able to do as an immigrant with very limited education. Aspects of that way of thinking are good, but to make application to everything distorts life and relationships.

When I read the text from Luke, I emphasized the words "I" and "my." How many times in those three verses were those two words used? Did you count them? Eleven. Point made! The man was totally self-absorbed; everything is for him. He only thought of himself and his accumulation of wealth. Why did he have to tear down his barns and build bigger ones? Why not just add another smaller barn? Obviously, he wanted to impress his neighbors with his wealth. The text describes a greedy, self-centered, and selfish man. Before telling the story, Jesus sets it up with this statement, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed" (Luke 10:15). All kinds, even that which is culturally and socially accepted and encouraged. Don't get sucked into the trap that more and bigger is always better.

George Barna studies church life in America and writes books about his findings. In a volume he wrote entitled What Americans Believe, he reported that 56% of Americans believe that the statement "God helps those who help themselves" comes from the Bible.

How easy it is to mix up our cultural formation and religious understanding and meld them together in our minds. Worse yet is that 63% of people think that the “purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment.” That’s quite unlike the biblical teaching that the purpose of life is to trust the Lord God and be servants of Christ. As Jesus said, “...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28).

Fifteen years ago, I learned of Sarah Pollack, a graduating senior at Mt. Vernon High School in Virginia. When she entered high school, her parents told her that if she earned good grades and a college scholarship, they would buy her a new car for her high school graduation present. She did earn very good grades, like straight A’s, and she was awarded a scholarship of \$5,000 a year to her school of choice in Indiana. She asked her parents if the \$15,000 they had saved for her new car could be used to set up a scholarship fund at Northern Virginia Community College for one Hispanic student per year as long as the money lasted. Her mother said she was thrilled with her daughter’s decision. Sarah’s selfless act surprised Fairfax County educators as reflected in the District Superintendent’s comment: She’s showing a maturity that defies age. It renews your faith.” Geovani Corvera, a native of El Salvador, was the first scholarship recipient from the fund Sarah established. Sarah said, “I’m just passing something on that I’ve been fortunate to have. That doesn’t make me any more special than anybody else.” (from an AP article that appeared in the Richmond Times Dispatch, in August of 1995).

What Sarah did sounds like an expression of the last line in today’s Gospel reading. She was “rich toward God” (Luke 10:21).

Being rich toward God means that we see everything as a gift from God to be used in concert with the will of God – God’s will to love, give, serve. The world tells me to take credit for all the advantages, privileges, and comforts of life readily available to me. I/We live in this time and place where so many needs of life are met with little effort on my part. I can flick a switch and deliver power to lights, stove, AC (or heat in the winter), computer, washing machine, dryer, TV, stereo. Or turn a faucet and take a warm shower, flush a toilet and the stuff disappears, turn a key and start the car, pick up the phone and plan health care. WOW! The easiest attitude would be, “Look at all I’ve accomplished. My hard work is paying off.” From the text for today quoting the man with all the crops, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry” (Luke 10:19). Instead we are called to the perspective of faith that invites us to give thanks to the Lord God for all that is at hand and then to ask for guidance in how In the name of Christ we use these manifold gifts, especially in service to others.

Jesus taught us to be rich toward God and how to be rich toward God. “Seek first the Kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33).

A business executive went to a business convention where several workshops were offered to help attendees. One was entitled: Jesus as CEO: Lessons from the Bible that Can help You in your Leadership. This particular business executive did not sign up for

that workshop saying, “I’m a Presbyterian (he could just as well have been a Lutheran), and have already heard most of Jesus’ ideas. Besides, who wants to end his career nailed to a cross.”

The cross is the crux. There God’s grace is on display in full measure. The living Christ invites us to embrace the cross so that we are “rich toward God.” The contrast between the way of the world and the way of the cross is quite dramatic. Only one delivers love and life, mercy and meaning, renewal and redemption. The cross of Christ saves, and we thank the Great God of the Universe for this precious gift asking always for the strength to follow. Amen.