

Teacher, he says, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.

Jesus refuses to be drawn into a triangle between this man and his brother. He asks, *Mister, who set me up to be a judge between you two?*

Then Jesus challenges the man making the complaint. *Take care*, he says, *Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in piling up possessions.*

The Greek word here for “greed” is *pleo-nexia*. If that sounds like some kind of disease, that’s pretty close to the mark. *Pleo* is the Greek word for more, so *pleonexia* is that disease of always wanting more. We could translate it “more-I-tis.” *Be on your guard against more-I-tis.*

The disease of more-I-tis brings to mind the so-called “30% phenomenon.” In a well known survey, a majority of Americans said they felt they would have “enough” if they just had 30% more income. That was true across the whole range of incomes—which means that, for most of them, even if they were given 30% more, they would eventually want another 30% more.

Jesus then told a story: *The land of a rich man produced abundantly. So he said to himself, “What should I do? My barn isn’t big enough for all this.”*

Oh yes, the problem of where to store all our stuff. Have you ever thought about all those ugly storage units that have cropped up all across our cities? You know what those are, don’t you? It’s a place where people pay rent for a room for just their stuff. Sometimes, families need do to this between moves, but otherwise, think how crazy this is—renting a building for your stuff, that you don’t really need, because it’s across town anyway.

So, we overhear this rich man talking to himself about his storage problem:

I know. I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll gather in all my grain and my goods, and I’ll say to self, ‘Self, you’ve done well. You have plenty of stuff laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink and be merry.

But just then God showed up and said, “You fool! This night your life is being demanded of you. And your barn full of goods—who will get it?”

You fool! Strong words from God. But what’s so foolish about this man’s plan? He’s come by his money honestly. He’s not hurt anyone. He just wants to put his windfall to work in order to secure his future, use his profit to improve his portfolio. Most people would say he’s wise.

But from God’s point of view, the man is a fool...for three reasons.

1st: He doesn’t acknowledge the giver of his gifts. The parable says: “the *land* produced abundantly.” Clearly, the land and its ability to produce grain are *God’s gift*, in the same way that petroleum is God’s gift, or any natural resource, or any human resource (because pro-creation is God’s gift), or any commodity or service based on any natural or human resource. In other words, everything and everyone is God’s gift to us!

This fact doesn’t seem to cross the rich man’s radar. He’s a fool because, like many others, he’s a *functional atheist*. He may not outwardly deny the existence of God, but he lives as if God were extinct. He believes that since he has done all the work, then he should reap all the rewards.

The 2nd reason he’s a fool: Not only does he give no thought to God’s contribution, he doesn’t think about all the people who worked hard for him on this big farm to bring in the harvest. No concept of sharing the wealth with them. He seems also to have forgotten those in his community struggling to survive. He hasn’t considered that the purpose of human labor and profit might be that we can give to others.

Our son Caleb and his friend Grayson started primer class when they were 3 years old. Early in the school year, another kid was carrying on because Grayson wouldn’t let him play with a toy. So the teacher told Grayson he needed to share. Five minutes later the teacher felt a tug on her dress. There was Grayson, his big brown eyes filled with tears. He said, “You have ruined my life! I don’t like to share!”

This rich man was like Grayson—he didn’t like to share. So he’s completely isolated, which is apparent in the way he talks. Everything is “my...” my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, and finally, my soul.

The only conversation this man has is a conversation with himself: *I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods. Relax, eat, drink and be merry.* Eating and drinking apparently all by himself. How merry is that?

He makes me think of my favorite headline in the newspaper *The Onion*: “CEO Resigns to Spend More Time With Possessions.” The man in the parable thinks he’s going to be merry with just his possessions.

His 3rd mistake was to believe that his money would bring him fulfillment and peace. Without God in his life, something had to take God’s place, and that something was Wealth. Money had become his idol, promising a serenity which it can never give.

But God brings the truth home for this man. *Fool, this very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*

The truth came home in a similar way for the novelist Stephen King. He wrote this in 2002 for The Heifer Project¹:

A couple of years ago I found out what “you can’t take it with you” means. I found out while I was lying in a ditch at the side of a country road, covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans like the branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm. I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you’re lying in a ditch with glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard.

We all know that life is ephemeral, but on that particular day and in the months that followed I got a painful but valuable look at life’s simple backstage truths. We come in naked and broke. We may be dressed when we go out, but we’re just as broke. Warren Buffett? He’s going out broke. Bill Gates, Tom Hanks? Going out broke.

So Stephen King has decided to make his life one long gift to others. “And why not?” he asks.

All you have is on loan anyway. All that lasts is what you pass on. ...Giving is a way of taking the focus off the money we make and putting it back where it belongs—on the lives we lead, the families we raise, the communities that nurture us.

¹ Stephen King, *World Ark*, Fall 2002, p. 28.

Jesus ends his parable by saying, *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.* And that's the whole point—being *rich toward God.* It's knowing that God is the source of all your blessings and cherishing those blessings, not by clinging to them, but by giving them to others, as God has freely given them to you.

Treasure is knowing you are loved and you can love in return. This is a treasure which the world cannot give, and which the world, therefore, can never take away.

Amen.