

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I don't know if kids today are still enamored of gold fish. When I was young that was something you just had to have—at least for a day or two or maybe three. Did you know that the first people to ever own goldfish were the Chinese people. Back a thousand years ago or so, Chinese people kept all kinds of fish, for food and decoration. One day, one of those fish gave birth to a beautiful, shiny, golden-colored fish. No one had ever seen a fish like it before. All of a sudden the very wealthiest people just had to have one. They paid the equivalent of thousands of dollars for just one gold fish. Whenever a new one was born, the richest and most powerful people would bid on that fish until the price reached into the tens of thousands of dollars. But, sure enough, people kept breeding gold fish and they were so plentiful they were no longer seen as special any more. Today gold fish are so common you can buy one for a dollar or so. Can you imagine that once upon a time people spent tens of thousands of dollars for a common little gold fish?

Isn't it funny what people treasure! Yard sales and garage sales take place in just about every neighborhood where people are trying to get rid of what were once treasures that have become junk to them, that they are hoping some fool will come along and decide to once again treasure. "Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!" saith Qoheleth.

Now, if I could hear as clearly as I can now see (did you notice—no more glasses. I had the cataract surgery last Monday. 20-20 vision, Baby! And that's just the one eye. The other one will be done a week from tomorrow).

Anyway, if I could hear as clearly as I now see, I bet I would have heard a great sigh of relief when Jesus begins today's parable: "There was a rich man...". Ah, you said, He's not talking to me, and you knew you wouldn't feel guilty about dozing off during this homily.

I have bad news for you. So, LISTEN UP! Who here hasn't wanted either a lot or just a little bit more money? Who here hasn't envied people who are rich? Who here hasn't thought how "lucky" someone was to inherit some wealth or even won the lottery? Who here hasn't thought about what they could do if they had just enough money? I can't tell you how many times I've been told, "Father, if I just win that lottery, you won't have to worry about the debt on the church!" I just wish all those who have promised me that over the years would have given in the basket what they spent on all those lottery tickets.

The fact is that none of us are excluded from this sharp and challenging teaching of Jesus. We're talking about a danger common to all of us as we ask the question, "How do we escape being possessed by our possessions?" When we think of the sense of security and the relief from financial strain that wealth could bring; of the desirable things it could purchase; of the opportunity it would give for doing good, which of us doesn't conclude it's good to be rich.

Jesus taught otherwise. In chapter 10 of Mark's Gospel, he says, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Mark tells us the disciples were "exceedingly astonished" by this teaching, and, frankly, so are we. Why?

The world tells us that those who are rich are living the good life. All of us, to a greater or lesser extent, want some of that for ourselves. The fact is most of us envy people who are rich; Jesus pitied them. He saw them being possessed by their possessions. This parable of the rich fool is designed to show how riches and good fortune in life often leads not to blessings, but to tragedy. Here we discover one of the great differences between the thinking of Jesus and our own.

Too many measure their value by material things. Someone once said that money can't purchase happiness, but it can help you to look for it in some very interesting places. A very wealthy man who had amassed a tremendous fortune at a very young age asked his wife one evening, "Honey, would you still love me if I didn't have all this money?" She replied, "Certainly, I'd love you, Sweetie. I'd miss you a lot, but I'd still love you." How easy it is to misplace our values.

Do I take my value, my sense of security and well-being from my possessions, each of us might ask ourselves? Do I put myself and my own in the center of things when it comes to my income?

Jesus is quite explicit about why he regarded the possession of wealth as undesirable. To possess wealth gives a person a false sense of security. He spoke in Matthew 13 as "the seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit." When a person possesses riches, he's deceived about his position in life. It's always about him.

The rich fool in the parable is neither concerned about God or others. It's all about him. I need more space to store my harvest. I'll tear down my barns and build larger ones. I'll store my grain and my goods and since I have so many good things for all the many years of my life, I'll rest, eat, drink, and be merry! It's all I and mine. There is no gratitude to God for the rich soil that produced the harvest. There is no appreciation of the blessing of the rain that nourished the crops. There is no consideration of those around him who had a greater need. There is no thought to share his wealth with his workers and the less fortunate. It's all about me, myself, and I. And there is certainly no idea that his life is not his own; that every breath, every day is a gift from God.

Disgusted, fed up with such self-absorption, God speaks, "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?"

Now Jesus speaks to us: “Thus will it be for all who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God.”

That, finally, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, is what we must consider in light of this parable, “what matters to God?” From the parable, in light of what the rich fool did not take into account, we might consider as the things that matter to God.

It really does matter to God that we make a return to Him in gratitude a fair share of all with which he has blessed us. When we think of our income as totally ours and don’t take into account that God gave us the talents, the skills, the abilities, and the opportunities to produce our income, we are like the rich fool of the parable. And, yes, the Bible reiterates again and again and again what God considers as his fair share—a full tithe (that is 10%) of the first fruits of all with which He has blessed us. By way of interpretation, that means if you are bringing home \$100.00 a week, you should be putting \$10 in the basket; if you’re bringing home \$500.00 a week, you should be putting \$50.00 in the basket, or if you are bringing home \$1,000.00 a week, you should be putting \$100.00 in the basket, and so forth. That’s not my word or calculation. That’s God Word. It isn’t that God needs our money. Rather, He does want a sign of our gratitude and a pledge of our trust and dependence on Him. He knows that we need to do this because when we do, we find our true value in our relationship with Him.

It really does matter to God that we are generous in caring for the poor, the needy, the orphaned, and the refugee. Again, to welcome and care for such as these is mandated in almost every book in the Bible, which we believe is God’s Word spoken to us. To ignore their needs; to say that they are not our problem is to be like the selfish, rich fool of the parable. God wants us to embrace every man as our brother, every woman as our sister, every child as our own, because He is Father of us all.

Finally, I challenge each of you to re-read this parable for yourselves. Notice the rich fool uses “I” 6 times, and he uses “my”, “mine” or “you” addressed to himself 6 times—in only three sentences. This is the language of a self-centered, selfish, egotist who has no consideration of God or any other person in his head or his heart. Rightly, God calls him a Fool. Could that be God’s estimation of you in the way you are allowing your possessions to possess you? Or are you “rich in what matters to God”?