

Series: Controversial: the Hard Sayings of Jesus

The Rich Farmer

Luke 12:13-21

Sermon by Lead Pastor Larry Renoe

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, March 3, 2024

A reading from Luke 12:13 through 21: “Someone in the crowd said to Him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ Jesus replied to him, ‘man who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?’ Then He said to them, ‘Watch out. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions,’ and He told them this parable, ‘The ground of a certain rich man was yielding an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, “What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.” Then he said, “This is what I will do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain, and I will say to myself, ‘you have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and be merry,’” but God said to him, “You fool, this very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God,” the word of the Lord.

I want you to know that the high point of our worship comes after the message, when we come to the table of the Lord. We like to mention that, especially for our online audience, so that you can get your milk and Cheerios or whatever you will use for communion this morning, but you’ll be prepared. We look forward to that time. Our mission is to become like Jesus and live for others, and part of that mission and motivation is being willing to be challenged by Jesus to align our lives again and again and again, and that is what this series on the hard sayings of Jesus has been. It is like every week we leave with blisters on our ears when we walk out of here. It has been hard, and yet you come back. We are so excited to be in the presence of Jesus and to hear his words, and today another hard saying and a difficult topic for us, so I’m going to ease into it with a little story, and I just want to share it with you. Then we’ll get into the text.

I once knew a teenager from rural Pennsylvania who had neighbors by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Bowersox. They were in their mid-sixties, no children, but they did have dogs, Chihuahuas, named Pinky and Blinky, which they spoiled as the children that they never had. They fed those dogs fresh ground hamburger every night, and when the teenager would occasionally eat a meal with them before their daily feeding time, the dogs would pull on his pant cuffs to get him away from the table. Mr. Bauersox had retired from running his hardware store in the next town over. Retirement seemed to include freedom from any physical labor, so he offered the young man the job of mowing his lawn. The teenager jumped at the job, not only for the \$5.00 per hour salary, but even more for the privilege of using his self-propelled lawnmower, the latest in yard manicuring technology. Over the years, the Bauersoxes and the teenager became close. I wouldn’t say that he reached the status of a Chihuahua, but he did become something of a grandson to them, and one evening they were sitting on their back porch having lemonade, when Mr. Bauersox, using questionable judgment, told the young man that someday, when both of them were dead and gone, he would be named in their will for part of the inheritance. Now at the time, through adolescent eyes, the young man believed the Bowersox fortune to be quite substantial, so the relationship also became self-propelled by love and money. Just before the young man left for college, Mr. Bowersox died. While the teenager was sad, he couldn’t help thinking the money

was closer. Mrs. Bauersox, though, had a long life in her. The young man would call his mom from college to ask with very mixed motives, “How is Mrs. Bowersox doing?” She lived into her nineties to face the plight of many elders: she outlived her money. When she died, she scarcely had enough money to buy her a casket. Grown into his thirties, the grown boy received notice that he was read in the will, but that the estate had no money, and I am not sure what made the grown boy sadder, her death, or her poverty.

It seems the color of money is of varied complexion. In its brightest hues, money paints the world brighter, pushes back the edge of poverty, puts food into hungry bellies, and provides education for the poorest. It cures diseases and heals the sick and supplies shelter and clothing for the poor. It paves roads for the goals of commerce and the gospel of peace, but in its darkest shades, money shrinks the human heart to the shape of what it does not have. How much virtue has been lost in the pursuit of money? How much anxiety has money caused the world? How much stealing, how much lying, how much killing, and how cold can money make the human heart? Ask that teenage boy from Pennsylvania who stands before you now. Money, money, money; Jesus talked a lot about money, so we should not be surprised that we’re ending up here in the hard sayings of Jesus, going to talk about money this morning. One Bible scholar says that if you put every word down on a page that Jesus spoke, one out of every three words would be connected to money or possessions. Jesus talked more about the sin of greed than He did any other sin, more than swearing, more than stealing, more than lying, more than adultery, and He talked about the spiritual practice of giving more than any other spiritual practice, more than prayer, more than reading your Bible, more than fasting, more than worshipping and witnessing. Jesus talked a lot about money.

We do not, “we” being Waterstone, and there is a strategy for that, and I am going to put it on the table. Waterstone is the kind of church where we have people watching online or in this crowd who are not yet Christians. They’ve been invited. They’re curious. They’re seeking. We have people who are brand-new Christians, and they are just beginning to understand what it means to follow Jesus and who He is, and then we have, of course, many veterans as well, but our strategy is to have first things first. In other words, one of the things we don’t want to be is the kind of church who comes and pounds on money when a person is not yet a believer in Jesus, and they leave thinking “Oh, it’s just what I expected, another money grab from a church.” We don’t want to be that kind of church, and so back before the pandemic, we used to do one message on giving a year, and we called it the annual painful message on giving, but we have not even done that since the pandemic.

First things first; I have to confess that I have had to rethink that a bit this week, and that there may be a new strategy. This was pointed out by a new commentary I read on the book of Luke that our text is from today, and he pointed out that in the context, there is something interesting going on. If you go to Luke chapter 12, verse one, we can read this. This is the context for our passage today: “Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples.” So, get the scene here, Jesus, paparazzi, a huge crowd following Him, but then He is going to speak in front of the crowd, to his disciples, and most of Luke 12 is on the topic of money. Don’t you find that interesting? There is an implication here. It seemed that when Jesus wanted to talk about money, He talked to his disciples, but He was cognizant that a huge crowd was listening in. In other words, there were sometimes when Jesus spoke directly to the crowd, because He wanted them to hear. There were other times when Jesus spoke directly to his disciples when He wanted the crowds to overhear. It seems that there is something that an outsider or a follower can

learn about Jesus and what it means to follow Him by listening in to the conversation that Jesus has with his followers about money. So today, if you are here visiting, you're watching online, you're not yet sure about Jesus or this Christianity thing, I want you to know, first of all, that you should take nothing that we say today as an ask for money. Jesus is not asking you for money. Waterstone is not asking you for money, but Jesus will be asking you for something today, but it is not your money. So, let's hear and overhear this message that Jesus is going to preach on money from Luke chapter 12.

So, we go to chapter 12, verse 13. Jesus is preaching away, and He is suddenly interrupted by someone in the crowd who says to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." My guess is that this is a younger brother who is upset with his older brother because the older brother is somehow cheating him in the inheritance, and it was common for a person in the Jewish community to go to a rabbi about a dispute like that one. After all, the Mosaic law was very clear about how to settle some of this conflict, and who else would you want to hear the Mosaic law from than a rabbi? What is surprising, however, is that this man goes to Jesus and **not** his own rabbi in his own town. Jesus is just passing through on the road to Jerusalem, so the man is going up to a complete stranger. The question is why? Why would he ask someone who is **not** his own rabbi to settle this dispute? I think the answer is because he has been listening to Jesus preach, and Jesus has talked about money so often that he says, "This is the guy my brother needs hear." You have had that happen in your thinking. Don't sit there and think, "Oh that is not like me." You have heard a sermon before, and you have said, "Oh I wish so and so was here to hear that sermon." That is what is going on here.

Let me pause for just a moment before we go on and see Jesus' response to this request, to ask this question, because I think it is a bit of an elephant in the room. Why does Jesus talk so much about money? I mean, you look at just the gospel of Luke. I would encourage you to read the gospel of Luke over the next few days and weeks, and you would be amazed at how much Jesus talks about money. There are thirty-eight parables, and in Luke, seventeen of them are about money and possessions. Jesus talked about money all the time. Why? I would offer this opinion. I think money is one of those spiritual practices that is not equal and parallel to all the other spiritual practices. So, there is giving, there is worship, there is witnessing, there is serving, and it is **not** one of many. I think the way Jesus talks about money is it is one over the many. I believe that the use of money and this practice of giving affects every part of our human lives and all of our spiritual disciplines. I would say it like this, if you can picture an image with me, what salt is to the ocean is what giving is to the Christian life. It affects every part of it, so let me illustrate.

In First Corinthians 13, Paul says here is a virtuous person. It is one who practices faith, hope and love, so you think about it; to be a virtuous person in God's perspective is to be a person of faith. What is faith? Faith is this idea of trust, and Jesus talked very much about trust, and He always took it to the world of money. He says, if you really want to trust the God who takes care of the birds and clothes the flowers, then what should we do? Jesus would say something like this. Here is what we should do. Chapter twelve, verses thirty-two and thirty-three: "Do not be afraid, little flock." This is after He said to trust me, and all these things will be added to you. I take care of birds. I take care of flowers. I will take care of you, so "Do not be afraid, little flock. Your father was pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions." You are a person of faith. "Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near, and no moth destroys." If you claim to be a person of faith, it gets to your wallet, and Jesus says, "Do you trust me? Then give."

Then, a virtuous person is a person of hope. Hope is this idea of significance and a promised future that radically changes the way you live your present. Often in our culture, the way we get significance and purpose is from the clothes we wear, the restaurants we eat at, the cars we drive, and the lifestyles we live. That is one way to get present significance and status, but a person of hope, in God's perspective, is one who says "No, I have a promised eternity. I have virtual riches, and that impacts my way of thinking. I do not need fancy clothes. I do not need fancy cars. I do not need any of this stuff that the world looks to for significance. I am a child of God," so you are a person of hope. Let's look at where your money is going and prove it.

Then, a virtuous person is a person of love. You are a person of love. All over the New Testament, in almost every story Jesus tells, like the Good Samaritan, that he paid money to put this wounded man up in a hotel, money was involved in him caring for the one that he helped. Money is always involved in caring for people that we claim to love. You are going to hate this. You are going to hate me for saying this, but you claim to be a person of faith, hope and love. From God's perspective, it is this; "Show me the money." That is what money is to Jesus. It is like the full-length mirror of the human heart. It backs up every claim that we make to being a godly person. It gets to money, and I think that is why Jesus talked about it so much.

When that idea gets into a church, look out. You read about the early church in Acts 4 through 6, and you will see that they were astonishing in their giving. They were selling land and property and giving away all their stuff to help the poor and their own church, the poor in their community. They were radically different than the world around them in the way they handled their money. Generosity was infected in them, and it was everywhere, coming through them, and that continued into the early third century A.D. We have this amazing little letter called the letter of Diognetus, written by a non-believer trying to explain the generosity of the Christian church. He is writing to a friend, and again, neither of them is a believer, but they are trying to understand this church, and he says about the church, "They share their table with all. They do not share their bed with all." That was the description of the church, and you understand it is in a culture, the Roman Empire, where the sun was setting on the gods, and politics now was all their religion, and in a culture where there is no tomorrow, there is no eternity, and there is no accountability, all that we have is the here and now, sex is cheap, and money is sacred. In that kind of culture, I mean, see if there are any parallels to today. I mean, it is okay to talk about your sexual exploits in a culture like that one. Just don't ever ask me to let you see my tax returns. Jesus talked about money, because it is not just one spiritual discipline. It is the spiritual discipline that touches everything a Christian is and does, and that is why one out of every three words He said related to money and possessions.

So, let's go on and see how Jesus responds to this man who comes to him for a financial dispute. Verses 14 and 15, "Jesus replied," I love the way Cash read it: "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then He said to them, "Watch out. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." So, the surprise now, the tension in the story, is that Jesus is **not** going to help this guy. He is saying, "I know exactly what brought you here and to ask this question. I know your heart, and your heart is full of greed," and He is not going to help him settle the dispute. We are a little surprised by that, because in other places Jesus actually claims to be a judge and an arbiter. In Matthew 25, He says, "I will be the judge before whom every person in the world will stand, to see how you have invested your life." Even later in chapter 12, verse 51, Jesus is talking about money again, and He says, "Do you think I have come to bring peace on Earth? No, I tell you, but

division.” That word, “division,” is the same word for “judge.” “I have come to be the judge over every person in all the world, so do not come to me asking that I be a judge in just one part of your life, to help you get the greedy inheritance you hope to get someday.” Why doesn’t Jesus help this man settle this dispute?

I think it is this; we cannot expect to come with Jesus and ask Him to settle an inheritance until we have asked Him to settle our whole life. We cannot come to Jesus and ask Him to help us with anything until we have asked Him to be our everything. We cannot come to Jesus and ask Him to be a judge for a part of our life that we think we have to have until we have seen Him as the judge over all of life, including my own. If I could give you a takeaway comment on this idea, it would be this; I forget the first word, Helmut. Just go. There it is. Jesus says, “I am not here to get you things you think will make your life good. I am here to be your life.”

We often come to Jesus with things like an inheritance and money, and “Why won’t that person return my romantic interest? Why? Why can’t I be made partner in the firm? Why can’t I get into the college that I wanted to get into?” and we ask Him to be the judge on those things and to measure it out for us, and Jesus is there only as the judge, the one who can say, “Your life does not consist of the abundance of your possessions. Your life is **not** going to be this or that. Even if you get them, you cannot keep them. Those are not the definition of your life. I am the definition of your life,” so Jesus is not going to settle this man’s dispute, because that is **not** the real problem. The real problem is he has greed in his heart. Let’s start there, and so again, I say to any one of you watching, and anyone in this room, Jesus does not want your money. He wants your heart. He wants your life. You might come to Him to ask Him to fix any part of your life. You might come to Him to ask Him to fix any part of your money, and it may even happen, and you may even get it, but if that is all you get from God, it is death. You will not live. You will not find what your heart really needs, and so to go after the greed in this man’s heart, who comes with this question, Jesus tells a story. It is quite a good story. I am going to put it in modern parlance, and we will sit and enjoy it together.

There is this guy, we are going to call him Rich Farmer, and he plants crops, and it is one of those years when everything works. The rain is right, the sun is right, the soil is right, and the timing is right. If Rich Farmer has a middle name, it is Amish. He is a rich Amish farmer. In Pennsylvania, when an Amish buggy drives by a McDonald’s, even the cheeseburgers taste better. I am telling you this all goes right. In fact, the Greek text says that when it all is said and done, he has, and I think this is a joke. It would have been a joke in the Greek language. He is in euphoria. I think that is a town in Kansas, isn’t it? Euphoria? So, he has euphoria going on in his life. Everything is working, and what does he do? He comes up with a business plan. It is called the Imax building expansion plan, and its slogan is, “Bigger barns are a better life,” and his mission statement is, “Take it easy, eat, drink and be merry,” so you see what is going on here? He owns all of the euphoria as his own, and he spends it all on himself.

I just think it is interesting in verses 17 to 19, Jesus being the master teacher that He is, He even has some fun with the language. I won’t read it to you, but you read it for a second or two and just notice how often the word “I,” or “my” or “myself,” occurs. It is a master storyteller driving the point home. This man thinks that it is from him, that this stuff is all due to him, that he owns the rain and the sun and the dirt, that all of this is from his own skillful ingenuity, and so he gets to do what he wants to do with it. He overlooks one very important place where he had to submit the building plans, Heaven County building supervisor, and God’s response is in verse twenty, where He calls the farmer a name, and then He asks him a really hard question. The name is, “You fool.” In the scriptures, the word “fool” is used

minorly of a person who has trouble with sequencing and logical thinking. More often, the word “fool,” especially in the Proverbs, is a person who doesn’t line up their life with the realities of life, and in this case rich Amish farmer does not line up his life with the fact that every person dies, that God is not only the God of the barns, but the builder too, and He does personal estate planning for everyone. Then he asks this question, “Who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” In other words, He calls him a name, a fool, and then He says, “Look, your life is **not** lining up with the reality here.

The reality here is, one, money can never buy security, never, and two, you do not get to keep what you have, never, and so to make sure we do not miss the point of the story, to make sure that this sin of greed is spoken to, Jesus ends with a wrap-up of the big idea in verse 21. This is for us and everyone who reads it after us, “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God,” and so as we end and begin to turn toward the table of Jesus, I want us to just apply this by two phrases, these questions. First, what does it mean to be rich toward God? That is the question, be rich toward God.

First, seek the right kind of wealth. So “rich toward God” does not mean that God needs our riches. God’s doing perfectly well with his tax returns. He owns everything. He doesn’t need anything. This has nothing to do with what we can give to God to make God’s life better. No, what He is talking about in being rich towards God is the idea of being rich with the things of God. In fact, a little later in Luke 12, again, go back to 12:33, that word “purses,” we get to have eternal purses better than Louis Vuitton purses. “Sell your possessions, give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out.” Each one of us will go to heaven, metaphorically with a purse or a man bag, and what will be in that purse? Things like selling your possessions and giving to the poor, things that are eternal. So, what’s eternal? Isaiah says that the word of God is eternal, and everything we do to carry the word of God around the world, every-thing we do in the name of Jesus, everything we do to reveal who God is to our neighbors and the world, that goes in the purse. We get to take that with us, and every person, every neighbor that we get to share Jesus with. There is this great parable. We do not have time to go there, but if you read it in Luke 16, it’s called the parable of the shrewd manager, and he uses his money, and how he uses it, Jesus admires, and at the end of it, Jesus makes this statement. Are you listening? “Use your money to gain friends who will be welcomed into heaven.” Wow. Use your money to gain friends who will be welcomed into heaven.

We do not have time to unpack all of that, but some of that means four hundred people here at Waterstone, we have four hundred Compassion Kids adopted. That is using your money to gain friends who will be welcomed into heaven. That is like being part of Royal Family Kids camp, giving a week of your life, and even your vacation, even your income to make a difference in a child from the inner city who has no parents, and they get to hear the message of Jesus. That is like hooking up with our CHAN, Colorado Hosting Asylum Network, with over 30,000 Venezuelan immigrants who are in Denver. That is having to do with signing up with CHAN to house some of them in those two or three spare bedrooms you never even walk into anymore. That is like anything we do that helps us to gain friends who will be welcomed into heaven. That is like at Waterstone this is the year of neighboring. We’re saying of all your friends choose one who, if you know he dies and does not know Jesus, you will weep. You will be broken because they don’t know Jesus, and we are saying this is the year that you, led by the Holy Spirit, but you are committed that you are going to share why you believe in Jesus with them. You use your money to gain friends who will be welcomed into heaven.

So, I want to put a word over that before we go to the Lord's table. The last part is this, as we think about being rich toward God, as we think about using our money to gain friends who will be welcomed into heaven, I want to ask, it is timely, right? We are all doing our tax returns. Here we go. I am meddling now, but could we put the word "more" over our charitable giving? More. Can we be more rich toward God? Then the second part of that, it is not only being rich toward God, but it is also **not** hoarding the wrong kind of wealth. Jesus makes the point in a stunning way with his use of pronouns, that this guy spent all the surplus, all the euphoria, on himself. He gave none of it away to anyone else or to anything else. He spent it all on himself. That is hoarding the wrong kind of wealth. That is why Jesus, when He talks to this young man, He goes right at it. He says, "Watch out. You might be greedy. This whole idea, you are consumed, you are awake at night. Your brother won't settle the inheritance. Do you think this wealth will make your life? You are missing it. Watch out."

I find it interesting that Jesus never has to say that about any other sin. When we are committing adultery, we know it. When we are lying, we know it. He doesn't have to say, "Watch out," but there is something about greed that we might be unaware of, and Jesus has to say to us, Waterstone Church this morning, "watch out." We might be greedy. We have to have a defensive posture against greed all the time, and what I like to remind us, and I remind my small group about this all the time. They hate me for this, but Jesus did not come and preach about money to solve our tensions about money, but in this culture, where we sit at the top of the heap in the history of the world, and even today, the top of the heap in all of where people sit with their wealth, we are the jackpot. He wants us to be intentional about our money. He does not want to lift the burden off. He does not want to say, "You have that figured out. Let's move on to something else." Again and again, "Watch out. You might be greedy."

Take a pulse. Look at your giving. Look at your income. Do some reflection before the Lord. We might be greedy, so the word I want to put over that, if the word we put over "rich toward God" is "more," here is a word for this idea of how much we spend on ourselves. Here's the word to wrestle with, "enough." What does "enough" look like for you? G.K. Chesterson said, "There are two ways to get enough. One is to accumulate more and more, and the other is to need less." How much do you need? Now this is where it gets a little deep. I spent some time journaling this week, and I want to end and go to the table with just a couple of paragraphs from my journal.

"Here in euphoria, where most of us live but don't give euphorically, hear this. God has no problem with how much we earn, no problem with a six or seven-figure income. The problem comes when that six-figure income says there should be a six-figure lifestyle. Put bluntly, God does not prosper one's business only to move your car fleet from Toyotas to Teslas. Over the years, people have called me up to ask whether I think it is Biblical to purchase a second home or a condominium. If I know them well, here is my response, Amos 3:15: "'I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house. The houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed, and the mansions will be demolished,' declares the Lord," and we laugh, and they hate me even more. What should a pastor say to his people about having two homes in a world where 24,000 people starve to death every day? Is it wrong to own a second home, or a third car, or a fourth television set, or a fifth pair of shoes? Unlike the prophet, the pastor answers, 'Maybe, maybe not.' It would be too easy if I just said "yes" or "no." Laws can be obeyed without changing your heart. What God desires is euphoric giving from a heart that treasures Him and what He loves. It is complicated. It is not an easy answer. Do our houses matter? It is complicated. It is not easy. I say that here in this room, most of our lifestyles are comfortable."

So here is our tension at Waterstone. Do our houses and cars and television sets and shoes reveal a life enjoyed while there is little money-backed concern for the needs of others? That is the question. As I read the New Testament, Jesus wants us to live at a level of joyful wartime simplicity. That is a phrase from C.S. Lewis. Where did Lewis get it from? First Timothy, Chapter 6, verses 6 through 10, “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it, but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money,” not money, “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and some people eager for money have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

We live this way, so that we have surplus, euphoria, to give away, in order to demonstrate the Father’s generosity, to alleviate misery, to share the good news of Jesus’ love for billions of people, and especially your one neighbor. If our tax returns reveal that we are **not** being rich toward God, but instead only building bigger barns for our stuff, then we do not know what it means to love Jesus or to be loved by Him. Second Corinthians 8:9 is the heart behind all of this, the heart Jesus wants to give us: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” They shared their tables with all. They did not share their beds with all. Though they were poor, they made others rich. Some of you are asking again, “Are you after my money?” Jesus says, “No, I am not after your money. I am after you. I am after your heart.”

So, to come to the table, the table of generosity, today we are going to do a liturgy together, and then I will share the words of institution over the table. I’ll be the leader. You be the church: “Holy Father, there is nothing that I have that you have not given me. All that I have and am belong to you, bought with the blood of Jesus.” Together: “To spend everything on myself and to give without sacrifice is the way of the world that you cannot abide, but generosity is the way of those who call Christ their Lord, who love Him with free hearts and serve Him with renewed minds, who withstand the delusion of riches that chokes the word, whose hearts are in your kingdom and **not** in the systems of the world. I am determined to increase in generosity until it can be said that there is no needy person among us. I am determined to be trustworthy with such a little thing as money that you may trust me with true riches. Above all, I am determined to be generous, because you, Father, are generous. It is the delight of your daughters and sons to share your traits and to show what you are like to all the world.” Amen.

40:28 minutes

Edited by Tom Kenaston

Message #750