

Parable of the Rich Fool

By **Fr. Stephen B. Reynolds**

Catholic Online (<https://www.catholic.org>)

10/21/2013 (5 years ago)

The "vanity" of the Scriptures refers to a false and deadly way of living. This understanding helps to unlock the meaning of Jesus' words in today's Gospel (Luke 12:13-21). The sacred text gives us two examples of a disordered relationship with material goods, one drawn from real life and the other a parable. They share a common theme, namely, a disproportionate attachment to material things upends one's sense of tranquility and order, and can misdirect one away from eternal life.



Rather than solving this petitioner's problem, Jesus responds with a parable. It is the story of the "rich fool." The Biblical meaning of "fool" is one who rebels against God or who has forgotten him. The man of the parable is so concerned with maintaining his wealth that there is no place for God in his life. He will die that night, and despite his possessions, he will appear before God empty-handed

In modern English, the word vanity means an excessive pride in one's appearance, qualities, or achievements. But it may also refer to something that lacks value that is worthless or trivial. This is the most ancient meaning of the term, and the one that is most often intended in the scriptures.

"Vanity of vanities, all things are vanity," says the author of Ecclesiastes, in one of the most familiar passages of the Old Testament (Eccl 1:2). All things are vain if they are uprooted from their fundamental meaning, which is found in God. The "vanity" of the Scriptures refers to a false and deadly way of living.

This understanding helps to unlock the meaning of Jesus' words in today's Gospel (Luke 12:13-21). The sacred text gives us two examples of a disordered relationship with material goods, one drawn from real life and the other a parable. They share a common theme, namely, a disproportionate attachment to material things upends one's sense of tranquility and order, and can misdirect one away from eternal life.

In the first instance, a man approaches Jesus with a problem. He is being treated unjustly in the matter of an inheritance. It is easy to feel sympathy for this person. Perhaps we have been in the same situation, where we suffer injustice at the hand of another member of our own family. In those cases, money can act as a focal point of long-simmering disputes or hurts.

Rather than solving this man's problem, Jesus deflects it. Normally very sensitive to matters of justice, Jesus does not try to untie the knots of this particular situation. Why? Three reasons come to mind.

First, these kinds of disputes can become the defining reality in one's life, if they are pursued to the exclusion of everything else. Second, because the issues involved can be complex - money, family, a history of past hurts and resentments - great care is needed to avoid becoming disproportionately obsessed with what may be something of just minor importance. Finally, perhaps the Lord is saying that sometimes it is better to suffer an injustice and retain our equilibrium and serenity, than to fight for one's right, but lose one's peace.

Rather than solving this petitioner's problem, Jesus responds with a parable. It is the story of the "rich fool." The Biblical meaning of "fool" is one who rebels against God or who has forgotten him. The man of the parable is so concerned with maintaining his wealth that there is no place

for God in his life. He will die that night, and despite his possessions, he will appear before God empty-handed.

St. Paul exhorts us to "put to death. the greed that is idolatry" (Col 3:5). Our true treasure is being a child of God, having received new life in Christ. Living in a way that contradicts this fundamental orientation of our life is deadly and leads to interior barrenness.

This Gospel invites us to examine our consciences and to ask the Lord to remove any attachments that deflect the action of grace in our souls. There may be instances in which we will have to let a personal slight or injustice pass us by without being resolved fairly. In those moments - which can be humanly very difficult - we ought to renew our trust in God and seek his justice, rather than our own.

After all, the purpose of our life is to give glory to God, not to obtain justice for ourselves. This does not mean, of course, that we should simply become a doormat for the world to trample upon. There are many instances in which we will have the obligation to stand up for our rights. Nevertheless, all of this must be tempered by the awareness that what is most important is that we grow rich in what matters to God.

Fr. Stephen B. Reynolds is the Pastor of St. Theresa Catholic Church in Sugar Land, Texas.