

STUDY 4 - LUKE 12:13-21

THE QUESTION JESUS WONT ANSWER

This familiar parable is that it is provoked by a question Jesus wont answer. Jesus has just been speaking directly to his disciples, but the crowd of thousands has been listening and pressing in. And one of the crowd shouts out.

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me”

This man is only asking what people would usually ask of a Rabbi. If you had a question, a problem in your life or family and you didn’t know what to do you would ask a rabbi for his wisdom and guidance on it.

So how does Jesus respond to this man’s question? You might expect him to ask the man to bring his brother to him. This seems to be an issue of fairness and justice. This man may be very right to think he was being treated badly. He might have been in very real financial need. But Jesus responds:

“Jesus replied, ‘Man, who appointed me to a judge or arbiter between you”

Jesus isn’t saying the man is in the right, or in the wrong. He’s not saying there is not an issue of justice to be dealt with. But he is refusing to be drawn in. Issues of financial justice between human beings are not what Jesus has come to deal with.

Jesus is making a very important statement about why he has come. He has not come to deal with our financial problems, whether they be small (to do with family problems), or large (nations against nation). He knows there is something worse than injustice, and something more important than money. He has come to deal with a debt far greater than any we owe to each other. He has come to divide, but not on earth but eternally. The judgement Jesus has come to deal with, is the great judgement when we will all face him at the end of time.

Verses 1-12 have made that very clear. Jesus is saying to this man “how can you listen to what I’ve just said about the fact you will have to come before me and all the angels in heaven when your life is over, and simply be concerned about an inheritance!”

When it is in our power we should act justly and in a caring way, especially with money. There is a place for Christians to campaign for justice around the world. But we should never give the impression that is people’s greatest need. There is something very wrong when you are more likely to find a fair trade poster in a church than hear a sermon on the reality of hell.

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But there is real encouragement in how Jesus responds to this man. You see what he is saying is “you can be a true disciple of mine. You don’t need to wait until your felt needs are sorted. You don’t need to be rich to follow me”. But he also gives a warning. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed”. It’s greed, not the way money is distributed which will keep us from following Jesus. What Jesus is saying here is that it’s better to be a victim of injustice than to fall into greed. Because it blinds us to our real need.

THE PERSPECTIVE FOOLS WONT HAVE

“A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” seems like the ultimate cliché doesn’t it?

But to bust that cliché Jesus tells a parable in verses 16-21.

The striking thing about this parable is just how normal it is. Some of Jesus’ parables require a bit of imagination to get into the story – this one really doesn’t for us. It is a story of 21st Century Britain.

A man is very successful, he sets up a business, it makes lots of money, he invests it wisely and buys a number of houses where he then goes to retire at 50, wanting spend the rest of his life playing golf, going on holiday and enjoying the family. That’s not a parable – that’s most peoples dream! In fact it’s more than a dream today isn’t it – it’s an expectation. Yet the twist in the story is that the man gets to his retirement party, and has a heart attack in the night, and dies. That’s the story Jesus tells.

But why does Jesus tell this parable? He’s saying – this is what happens when you get everything. Imagine that your greed could be satisfied. You will still have a big problem. Imagine if that inheritance was divided with you – you would still lack what is most important.

Notice where the problem is with this man. It is not that he is productive (verse 16 – his ground produced a good crop). He is achieving his wealth legally, morally, rightly. The problem is not that he is thinking and planning about what to do with it (verse 17 and 18). Wise planning for the future is a good thing. This is not a parable against making money. Read Proverbs and see all the good things God says about being productive and making good decisions about money.

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That needs to be said, because we should never give the impression that Godly people don't go into business. We can sometimes give the impression that the only professions Christians should enter are the caring professions (teachers, nurses, doctors) or church workers and missionaries. Praise God for them! But we need Christian business people. We are called to be productive, to make money, to create jobs.

His problem isn't even the building of the barns – we need to save and invest wisely. Just because you are saving and investing it doesn't mean you are selfish.

His problem is his perspective. And that's revealed by what he says in verse 19 "And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things stored up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and be merry'"

He believes that his wealth has brought him absolute security. Those barns were his ticket to heaven. He saw heaven as a life of enjoyment, and he had it. He had no thought to anything else. If you were to ask him the question "what is life about" he would have said. "Pleasure". For him money was the ticket to a life of complete unfettered pleasure. It's not that he was necessarily going to fill his life with debauchery. There's nothing wrong with eating or drinking or happiness. It's just, that all there was to his life. It's that attitude that God responds to. This man said this to himself, but God hears. Verse 20 "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?'"

God's verdict on his life is that he is a fool. The same verdict that Jesus made on the Pharisees life. And "fool" is not just an insult, but it's almost a technical term in the Bible. It's a term for life lived without recognising God. It's a life that ends in ruin. It's a life which does not lead to true life. He proves that by taking this man's life.

It's striking the language this man has used throughout the parable isn't it? He sees everything as his. "My crops" "my barns" "my grain" "my self". But God says – you are mine. Your life is mine. So I will demand it of you".

What perspective should this man have had? Well, the perspective which takes into account eternity. A perspective which sees beyond retirement. A perspective which sees to the reality of verse 3 and verse 9 of Luke 12. That there is coming a day when we will stand before Jesus. When our security then will be what matters. He would have seen that his wealth was a blessing from God, but that his responsibilities on earth have increased, rather than decreased because God has chosen to give it to

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him. He would have seen that his life comes from God, so he should live wisely – fearing God, walking in his ways.

There's a verse in the Psalms which comes up a number of times which I'm sure is familiar to many of us. "The fool says in his heart, there is no God". It can be very easy to read that verse and feel a bit smug. You can read "The God Delusion" by Richard Dawkins, close the book, and think "fool". Denial of God's existence is one way to be foolish.

But there's another way to be foolish according to that verse and this parable which hits a lot closer to home. We are fools if we act foolishly. If we live as if there is no God. If we think our security depends on our money, our salary, our possessions, then it doesn't matter what is coming out of our mouths, in our heart we are saying "there is no God". If all our decisions are motivated by having a secure future here and now, then our hearts are being guided by the belief that there is no God. That's what this parable teaches. What does the attitude of your heart say about your belief in God?

This is very challenging to us in the West. This is the advert we will never see. This will never be taught us at school. You'll never read a magazine which encourages you in this. But it affects all our decisions. It affects our priorities in life. The issue isn't what job we take, or what house we live in but why? What's motivating those decisions? We can't see each others hearts, but God can. It's interesting that today more people live in cities than don't live in cities around the world, yet Christians tend to flee the inner city. Does that say something about our priorities (that schooling, and house prices are more important to us than being salt and light?).

It will affect how we act in tough times, like a recession. Will we hold on tightly to what we have, or will we give? It will affect how we think about our children. What do you most want for your children? Do you breathe a sigh of relief when you see them buy a house and take a good job...even if they are not walking with God?

THE RICHES THAT WONT FADE

There is an alternative to the life of this rich fool, and it's what Jesus says in verse 21 "be rich towards God". To recognise that he is where our security is found. And Jesus expands on that in verses 22-34 in the next study.

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Jesus is not saying God doesn't care about your life. Jesus tells this story so that when we get to the end of our life, and we come before him our life won't be summarised as "folly", but as "wise".

How do we do that? We recognise that all we have comes from him. Even if we are making lots of money, those skills you are using come from God. Thank him every day. Don't take what you have for granted. We all need to pray "give us today our daily bread".

We need to recognise that our greatest need is for him. That is why "greed" is so harmful. It takes our desires away from Jesus. Greed means we long for stuff more than we long for God. Greed means we think stuff will satisfy us, rather than God will. Have you ever been in that situation where you hear of a man with a lovely wife go off with another woman? Perhaps someone you know? Don't you think "you idiot! Don't you realise what you had?" Well, if we are chasing stuff, that's what we are doing. God wants to give us himself! Don't forsake that for stuff.

We realise that eternity is what counts. The verdict on your life is not your bank balance. Don't think when you press that button on the atm that is your score card for your life. No – the question is "what does God think". If we are trusting Christ, regardless of our finances God loves us. If we are not, it doesn't matter how much we have. He who dies with the most toys still dies and faces God.

And above it all, we trust God.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

How has Jesus described the Pharisees in 11:40? What does it mean to be a fool (see Psalm 14:1)?

What question prompts this parable? (see vs 13)

How does Jesus respond? (vs 14) Why do you think he doesn't get drawn in to this man's specific problem?

What has Jesus just been talking about (remember vs 1-12)? Does that help us understand why Jesus gives the warning he does in verse 15?

Try and retell the parable Jesus tells in verse 16-20, but set it in 21st century Britain.

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What is problem with the man in the story? Is it that he is productive? Is it that he thinks ahead?

What does this man think the meaning of life is?

What is God's verdict on this man's life (vs 20)? What didn't this man give any consideration to?

How does our attitude to money and possessions reveal our attitude to God? If "ones life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions" (vs 15) what does it consist of? (vs 20)

Practically, what does it mean to be "rich towards God"?